

# County approves money for artificial turf

■ Richard Montgomery will be first public school in Montgomery

BY MELISSA J. BRACHFELD AND WARREN PARISH STAFF WRITERS

When Richard Montgomery High School plays its first home football game in the fall, the players will be the first county

school students competing on their own artificial-turf field.

The County Council voted 4-0 Tuesday to accept a \$300,000 contribution from Maryland Soccer Enterprises and transfer \$475,000 worth of surplus funds to pay for the turf.

Council members Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park and Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park were absent from the vote.

In exchange for its contribution, Maryland Soccer Enterprises gets use of the field for its programs.

"The big advantage of artificial turf is you'll be able to use it all the time," County Council

Vice President Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg said.

The turf is safer and more environmentally friendly than grass, Richard Montgomery High School Principal Mozeno E. Carrasco said Tuesday.

"This will be a great opportunity to develop our Sports Academy program, where students will manage and organize events," he had said in a previous interview. "And it's also an opportunity for the community to have more access to fields."

A new Richard Montgomery High School was recently completed on the former site of its athletic fields; the old building

will soon be demolished to make way for new fields. The project is estimated to cost \$900,000.

In addition to the council's money and the contribution from Maryland Soccer Enterprises approved Tuesday, the project will be funded by \$125,000 already set aside by the county to build a grass field at the Rockville school.

The artificial-turf field at Richard Montgomery will serve as a pilot program for the rest of the county school system.

Montgomery County Public Schools plans to develop plans for installing turf fields at the other 24 high schools.

Synthetic fields have gained increased usage over the past several years, but remain somewhat controversial. Proponents argue they are safer than the last generation of artificial turf (Astroturf) and that their durability mitigates the higher installation cost. Opponents say synthetic turf still increases the likelihood of injury and cite environmental issues, including stormwater drainage and the potential toxicity of the materials.

Before the Tuesday meeting, the County Council's Education Committee held a Feb. 12 public hearing on the matter and two work sessions on Feb. 19 and Thursday to discuss those issues.

Two speakers voiced opposition to the Richard Montgomery project at the Feb. 12 hearing. Parent activist Janis Sartucci cited a long list of school projects whose funding has been delayed.



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Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist.3) of Gaithersburg, County Council vice president

"My issue with artificial turf is the process," Sartucci said. "What happened that this suddenly became our No. 1 priority?"

Marci Calantonio, the parent of a Poolesville High freshman who contracted methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) during football practice in August, raised safety concerns.

"I am primarily concerned because it's more abrasive; it will cause more turf wounds," Calantonio said. "No one can conclusively say when anyone gets stapled, but I can tell you, you had to have a break in the skin."

But at the Thursday work-session, Andrews said he was satisfied by council staff's research, which stated there is no significant health or environmental concerns associated with artificial turf fields.

"I see this as an innovative proposal and it encourages out-of-the-box thinking," he said.

At least one public high school has a synthetic field in Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Charles, Frederick, Harford, Howard and Washington counties and Baltimore City.

All but Baltimore City and Baltimore and Washington counties plan to install more within the next two years, Joe Lavorgna, director of the school system's Department of Facilities Management, said in a previous interview with The Gazette.

In Montgomery County, Maryland SoccerFlex in Bowie opened three synthetic fields this winter; Bullis, Landon and Georgetown Prep schools have artificial surfaces on their stadium fields.

The school system is recommending artificial turf by FieldTurf Tarkett, an international manufacturer and installer.