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Youth groups contest use of athletic fields in Montgomery County

Interagency board rethinks policy on ballfield use

by Alex Ruoff, Staff Writer

The high demand for athletic fields in Montgomery County has parks and schools officials rethinking who's allowed to play ball and when.

The interagency group responsible for allocating fields to users unveiled Thursday potential changes to the Adopt-a-Field program, the vehicle sports organizations have historically used to give themselves priority use of county fields, in hopes of making the process more equitable.

Newcomers have accused the decade-old program of favoring the wealthy, allowing those willing to pay more to play more while longtime adopters claim it has improved substandard fields at little cost to the county.

Adopt-a-field, according to Interagency Coordinating Board policy, offers groups a chance to get first priority of use of athletic fields in exchange for covering the cost of maintenance and upkeep for three- or five-year periods. These adopters get first choice of fields three or four days during the week and one weekend day. Schools, childcare programs, Parent-Teacher Associations, and government agencies are favored.

The proposed policy changes — implemented differently between schools and parks — was spurred by increased competition for weekend field use, particularly between two youth sports groups: Bethesda Chevy Chase Baseball Inc. and Koa Sports, said Elizabeth Habermann, financial administrator for Community Use of Public Facilities, the group responsible for connecting park owners with the public.

The group schedules roughly 160,000 hours worth of field permits each year, mostly to youth programs, among the 300 fields owned by the Montgomery-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and 240 fields owned by Montgomery County Public Schools, she said. Just about every baseball diamond and soccer field south of Rockville is booked months in advance for daylight hours on Saturdays and Sundays.

The battle between Koa and BCC baseball over fields in southern Montgomery County caused her group to suspend issuing new agreements last summer, she said, in hopes revisions could be made to the policy.

Koa Sports founder Tony Korson said when he started his organization two years ago he found that baseball diamonds, in particular, were difficult to secure because established groups always had first say. He said his teams, which consist of about 2,600 players throughout the year, often travel to Loudoun County in Virginia or upcounty for fields or cancel games.

“Any sports organization can tell you there’s no sports without fields,” he said.

Korson said he is asking for a sunset provision, allowing agreements to expire, and a lottery or bid process for field adoption.

Habermann said her group is looking into capping agreements at five years, priority days at three weekdays and one weekend day per field.

BCC Baseball Executive Assistant Jean Kurtz said her group, the largest user of the adopt-a-field program, has spent more than \$2 million over eight years to ensure the 20 fields it adopted are aerated, mowed, and have dugouts and batting cages. This year, the group, which has about 2,700 youth athletes signed up to play this fall, expects to spend about \$250,000 on field maintenance and improvements.

The group has adopted some of the highest-in-demand fields in the county, such as the ones at Westland Middle School and Bethesda Elementary School. Kurtz said the fields are well-used because her group helps them up.

“There was very little upkeep of these fields when we first began,” she said. “...I think they’re probably the best and in high demand because we’ve adopted them.”

At a Thursday meeting of the county’s Planning, Housing, and Economic Development Committee, Councilman Craig Rice (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown said he is worried the current policy could favor wealthier, more established groups over budding ones.

“My concern is that [these groups] are buying their way into whatever they want,” he said. “I don’t think that’s the way it should be.”

Councilwoman Nancy Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park said the problem doesn’t lie within the policy, but with the county’s stock of fields.

“What we should take away from this is that there are insufficient fields,” she said.

Park and Planning’s Park Recreation Open Space Plan, written in 2005, calls for adding 73 multi-purpose rectangle fields and 15 youth fields to the county’s stock by 2020.

Habermann said her group will meet with members of the Interagency Coordinating Committee later this month in hopes of instituting some of the proposed changes before the end of the year.

