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Fields of Dreams...But Who Pays to Take Care of Them?

By *Sophie Braccini*

The Moraga School District and the Town of Moraga are both dealing with financial challenges, so when the School District wants to pass along to the Town a significant increase in the cost of sports field maintenance, it is met by resistance from the Town Council however justified the District might be. At a Joint Meeting on April 29, the two bodies did not resolve the question. In all likelihood, some of the cost will be passed along to the different community sports organizations that use the fields. Before a final decision is made, Town, School and stakeholders will meet to try to work out a fair solution.

The Town has been contributing \$45,000 per year since 1990 to the maintenance of the recreation facilities that the School District owns and opens to the public. Al Dessayer, who was a Town Council Member at the time, said a contract was never signed between the two entities to formalize the agreement.

"The school district is asking the town to raise its participation from \$45,000 to \$73,651," explained Rick Schafer, the Superintendent of the Moraga School District, "this increase results from the simple actualization of the allocation the Town agreed to make in 1990."

For a town that's facing a difficult budget situation, the raise is steep. "If it was in another period we could agree," hypothesized Vice-Mayor Chew, "your figure is not out of character, but it represents a big increase for us at this time." The Town can't actually commit to an increase until it has adopted its budget in June.

The Town made other proposals to the School to diminish their expense, such as taking charge of the scheduling of the fields or use some of the Measure WW bond money (about \$777,000 that the Town will receive as the result of the passage of the bond) to improve the fields and save money for their maintenance.

But the offer didn't appear practical enough to the District. "Both bodies have a problem with money at this time," recognized Dexter Louie, President of the Governing Board, "but it is hard for the School District to divert money from education to sponsor private groups. We can't continue to do it."

According to the School District's report, it costs them \$241,081.76 to maintain fields for uses that are not related to school activities. After the Town's \$45,000 contribution and the \$98,810 paid by field users, the District says it still spends \$97,271.76 of its own money to support activities that are not linked to its primary mission.

If the Town cannot help, the only alternative left to the School District is to increase fees for field users. The School District estimates that about 3,500 individuals use the fields and gyms every years, so the increase would amount to

about \$27 per person (this is only an average; the School District calculates the fees according to a whole series of parameters.)

Joe Rosenbaum of the Moraga Baseball Association explained that his group is already investing a lot of money in the fields, "We pay \$15,000 to rent the fields, we have added \$12,000 worth of safety features on the fields, for a total budget of \$98,000," he said. Individual members contribute between \$375 and \$425 to the club and Rosenbaum wondered if a cost increase could be easily paid by families.

According to Liz Faoro , representing the Lafayette Moraga Youth Association (LMYA), they try to keep the cost to families as low as possible so that every child can participate in sports.

"It is part of the Parks and Recreation Department's responsibility to provide these facilities," claimed Rosenbaum; in many cities most of the fields belong to the towns and not the school districts.

With no solution evident, Council Member Mike Metcalf proposed to include the major users groups in a discussion of the agreement regarding the maintenance of the fields. Since neither party was ready to approve an agreement without a commitment from the Town, Mayor Dave Trotter proposed that both chiefs of staff meet to bridge the gap. The School Board concurred.

During its goal setting session on May 9, the Council discussed the issue at hand. In the budget that she presented, Finance Director Joan Streit had included the usual allocation for the maintenance of the District's recreation facilities. "We will make a decision when we finalize our budget in June," said Trotter, "but if the School District wants to stop what it calls the 'sponsoring' of the fields, it is likely that the users' fees will have to be raised over time."

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