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Hopewell Valley school board supports community-led turf field project

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By R. Kurt Osenlund, Pennington Post

Sponsored by the Hopewell Valley Recreation Foundation, the project received the board's blessing Monday night following some earnest speeches from chief organizers Don and Cynthia Wiley.

The Hopewell Valley Regional School District Board of Education unanimously passed a resolution at its Monday meeting supporting a new turf field project sponsored by the Hopewell Valley Recreation Foundation. On hand to promote the project and ask for the board's blessing were local couple and Hopewell Valley Pop Warner parents Don and Cynthia Wiley, along with Jon Butler, a recreation foundation representative and Pop Warner executive vice president.

"There are a number of people in the audience tonight who are excited about the possibility of the board considering turf fields at the high school," said Don, also a Pop Warner coach and board member, who recognized the parents and players who filled the meeting room seats. "I'm representing football, but obviously there are a lot of other turf sports – soccer, lacrosse, field hockey – that would be very interested in Hopewell Valley adding a state-of-the-art facility for those sports."

Cynthia, Don explained, is leading a committee through the recreation foundation to raise funds for the turf field project. All of the funds will be raised independently, and the folks present at Monday's meeting weren't asking for money from the district, but simply the board's endorsement.

"We are going to do the private funding with the help of the rec foundation," Cynthia said at the podium. "We already have some money set aside for the fields, and our community is very special because they're very supportive of our students and our athletes. In the past, with the help of many parents, I've raised a lot of money for Pop Warner, and we're really excited to make this happen."

According to Don, the recreation foundation has already provided \$100,000 to go toward the turf fields, the first chunk of what is expected to be a price tag of over \$1 million. The money, Cynthia said, will be needed for the three phases of the project: turf, bleachers and lights. The first phase alone is expected to take two to five years of planning and construction, and the entire undertaking is expected to take approximately a decade to complete.

Superintendent Thomas Smith explained that district officials met with the Wileys several months ago regarding the turf field project, and he said that, "from the start, [the Wileys] really understood what the district was facing in terms of funds, or lack thereof." Smith said the Wileys' mission was never about coming to ask the district to fund a turf field; it was about wanting to support the students. Smith thanked them for taking the initiative and following through with their vision.

"This is, pardon the pun, a grassroots effort," Smith said, "to put together a field for all of our students. I think this is really the future of school districts – this partnering with the community to provide programs and services and facilities for our students."

Certain board members, including Leigh Ann Peterson and Roy Dollard, expressed concerns regarding what the board pledging their support would entail, and whether or not giving the project the board's blessing would result in financial liabilities for the district (Dollard cited a past instance in which such a scenario took place). But both were reassured once told that the evening's resolution was simply to endorse the continuation of the project, and that no real commitment was yet being made.

Board member Dan O'Connor, himself a Pop Warner coach, insisted to the board that the district needs a new turf field, and not just because in conditions like the current drought, traditional fields can barely be tread upon without damage (the desired location for the new turf field is at the site of the girls field hockey field at Central High School).

"People have been coming forward for years saying, 'we need it, we need it, we need it,'" O'Connor said. "You can probably count on one hand the [area] districts that don't have turf fields. The list is short – it's basically just us."

Cynthia, pleased with the board's decision to formally support the project, spoke up once more at the end of the discussion.

"We're gonna make this happen," Cynthia said. "We're going to fundraise aggressively and we've got a lot of support behind us. I really want the word out there to the kids and the coaches and the staff that we're going to make this happen for you."

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