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News / GTA

U of T's planned AstroTurf Pan Am Games field creates controversy

The University of Toronto's \$9.5 million plan to replace the grass back campus field with AstroTurf for the 2015 Pan Am games is causing a turf war with some students and professors.

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ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE / ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE

Canadian field hockey players Ken Pereira and Emily Rix pose at the site of the announced Pan Am Field Hockey Centre, at the University of Toronto, November 2, 2012.

By: [Laura Kane](#) News reporter, Published on Tue Feb 05 2013

The University of Toronto is in the middle of a turf war.

At stake is an uneven swath of land south of Hoskin Ave. and east of St. George St., known as the back campus field. The muddy, bumpy stretch has tripped up student athletes for years and most agree it needs a makeover.

But not everyone agrees with the university's \$9.5-million plan to build a world-class field hockey pitch to be used in the 2015 Pan Am games. The natural grass will be ripped up and replaced with artificial turf — to the horror of some on campus.

"When I walk past a field in the summer, I love to breathe the fresh air that comes off of the grass. I don't like to breathe chemicals," said Alan Ackerman, an English professor at the university.

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Ackerman and 31 out of 34 members of the University College Council voted in favour of a motion to register “strong concerns” about the loss of green space on campus last fall.

He also sent a passionate memo to the governing council outlining his “environmental, health and social concerns” about artificial turf fields. He says that many alumni and professors have also written to complain.

“This plan would have a major impact on our environment, in the university community as well as downtown Toronto and beyond,” he said.

Those who oppose artificial turf fields bring up a number of issues. They argue real grass is a cooling surface necessary to combat climate change, whereas artificial turf heats up significantly in the sunlight.

Further, grass soaks up rainfall, while turf diverts it into runoff waters that could potentially leak into ground water and drinking water.

“The environmental impacts were never really carefully considered,” said Stuart Gaffin, a research scientist at Columbia University’s Centre for Climate Systems Research who has studied artificial turf fields.

Some artificial turf is made from rubber tires, which are filled with “really dangerous, chemical, filthy stuff,” he said. “A lot of this stuff hasn’t been tested.”

The level of lead has also been raised as a concern. Still others fear that harmful chemicals could be breathed in by players or that bacteria from their sweat and skin cells can create a “bacterial breeding ground” on the plastic.

The Synthetic Turf Council, a U.S.-based industry body, says that numerous studies have shown that artificial turf is safe and that lead levels are “minimal.”

The university’s turf will be made of either knitted nylon or tufted nylon, polypropylene or polyethylene. The structure underneath will be made of a granular sub-base and so-called “porous” asphalt, and will include drainage for storm water.

The university said that it completed all required assessments with Infrastructure Ontario and the Pan Am Games. Soil and archeological assessments were required, but not a full environmental assessment.

It is a requirement of the International Field Hockey Federation that turf be synthetic. The turf still requires watering, to reduce friction and allows for a faster ball speed.

“It is one of the top products used and internationally recognized by Field Hockey International,” said Anita Comella, assistant dean of the faculty of kinesiology and physical education.

The university is paying 44 cents on the dollar for the field hockey pitch, which will be one of only two in Ontario. The field will be usable year-round, maintenance costs are expected to be lower and the turf won’t need to be replaced for two decades.

The governing council voted in favour of the deal in April 2012 and shovels will hit the ground this July.

Most student athletes are happy to say goodbye to the back campus field, where intramural sports teams and varsity rugby, lacrosse and flag football players faced often treacherous conditions.

The field was only usable between late August and early November, when rainfall turns it into a sloppy, muddy mess that is notorious for causing injuries.

“I don’t think we would call it a grass field. I think we’d call it a mud pit,” said Madeleine Cho, goalie for the University of Toronto’s varsity field hockey team. She and the rest of the team are thrilled about the new turf.

“It will be amazing. I’ll have turf I’m not going to get injured on, and we’ll get to play an international level of hockey.”



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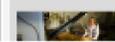
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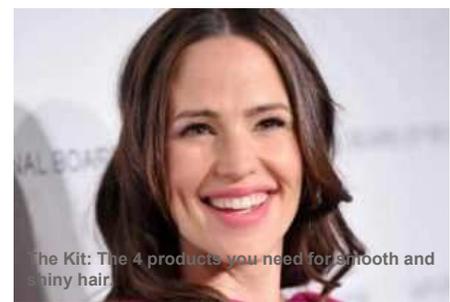
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Creative Thinker

Replacing living, breathing, natural grass with artificial turf can only be termed idiotic. As a U of T graduate student, I am scandalised that university decision-makers can be so ecologically illiterate. Grass - while not ideal - at least helps filter pollutants and allows for the soil to live and absorb run-off water. Psychologically, walking through green spaces refreshes the spirit and awakens the senses. Artificial turf, in contrast, is toxic and will kill the living soil below. If the plan were to replace the playing field with a forest, a park, or permaculture garden, I would be supportive - but this is a move in the wrong direction and goes against all the efforts to "green" the campus. It is also now a common space open to all - let's not enclose the commons! Leave it free for all people to walk, play, breath, rest, and enjoy.

Last Week Comment Share



beaver beauty

As a student who passes by that field and has played football on it many times, I do not want it to become astroTurf. The University College area of U of T has a Victorian style aesthetic (no pun intended) and having artificial turf will ruin the appeal of the back campus. Just like that professor said, it is a nice smelling area too. Have all these athletes forgotten about the great spirit that comes with playing football in the mud? It's a part of the game! Suck it up and play. It is completely ridiculous to honour international field hockey players more than we do our residents who live and work and truly value the land.

3 Weeks Ago Comment Share



Scot2

I played field hockey many years ago and it was on grass. Keep the grass but, have it groomed as it should be whether it is for hockey or any other sport. To have a field just for field hockey which is not a big sport in Ontario is ludicrous, plus the amount of money being spent is stupid it will never be used.

4 Weeks Ago Comment Share



ABBA

"take a large green space and replace it with a dedicated field". It's not a "green space", like a park or something. It's a crappy, muddy, bumpy, dangerous, athletic field that's worse than my old high school football field. I cross it every day and wonder why I haven't broken my ankle yet. Again. AstroTurf it.

4 Weeks Ago Comment Share



Daniellabelle

If it's "muddy and bumpy", why not even it out and groom the field? A no brainer in my view. Probably costs less too.

4 Weeks Ago Comment Share

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