



The “Pit” Turf Field Update

Mountain Lakes Board of Education
March 17, 2025

Grant Background

- The Mountain Lakes School District (MLSD), including district administration, coaches, and staff, was informed by former U.S. Senator George Helmy about an opportunity to apply for a federally-funded state grant to be used for outdoor improvement projects.
- From the outset, the Pit was identified as the optimal location for a second turf field by our district athletics and administrative staff.
- The grant application was initiated by MLSD Business Administrator in October 2024 after a presentation to the Board of Education (BOE) Facilities Committee.
- Upon initiating the submission process, the ML administration reached out to the Mountain Lakes Borough Manager regarding the Pit. The BOE attorney also sent written communication to the Borough Manager.
- The public was informed of the grant once it was awarded to the MLSD at the November 2024 BOE meeting and the BOE voted to approve the award of the grant at our December, 2025 BOE meeting.



Grant Background, *continued*

- The \$1.2 million dollar grant was pursued with the goal of finishing construction by the end of 2025.
- The process ramped up in earnest in February 2025 when the MLSD and Borough Shared Services Committees met to address ownership of the Pit.
- After Borough and MLSD Shared Services Committees met, the MLSD initiated a title search to find out the precise ownership of the land involved with the Pit (*title search results still pending*).
- Given a tight timeline, the Borough worked expeditiously to ensure processes for conveying land to the MLSD met applicable standards for local laws (public hearing and passing of ordinance).
- On March 10, the Borough held a public hearing to establish an ordinance to convey the land owned by the Borough that includes roughly half of where the Pit is located to the MLSD.
- The Borough is scheduled to vote to approve or deny the ordinance to convey the land in late March.



QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC



FUNDING/APPLICATION/SCOPE

Public Questions to the BOE: Funding

Question: How did the Mountain Lakes School District become the recipient of a \$1.2 million grant?

Answer: Mountain Lakes resident and former U.S. Senator George Helmy reached out to members of the school athletic community about a federally-funded state grant opportunity to turf a second athletic field to benefit the families and students of Mountain Lakes. Senator Helmy met with athletics and alumni stakeholders who then recommended the administration apply for this grant opportunity for the purpose of installing a second turf surface on district property.

Public Questions to the BOE: Grant Application

Question: Was this grant application discussed at any board of education meetings publicly or privately? Who applied for the grant?

Answer: The BOE first mentioned the possibility of being awarded a grant to put in a turf field during a public Facilities Committee report to the Board in November 2024. In December 2024, the Business Administrator/Facilities Committee presented about the award of the \$1.2 million grant and the proposal to renovate the Pit. The BOE also publicly thanked Senator Helmy and acknowledged former Business Administrator Alex Ferreira and our amazing athletics administration and coaches, who applied for the grant. The BOE and the BOE attorney made a public statement at our March 3rd, 2025 meeting about the Pit and publicly thanked the Borough Council, our staff members and our community for their support of this project. The grant application was executed by the MLSD Business Administrator with the full support of the Superintendent and the BOE Facilities Committee.

Public Questions to the BOE: Scope of Project

Question: What will be the use of this new turf field?

Question: Is the plan to expand the current field?

Question: What guarantees will be place, to ensure this field will not expand past its current footprint and the existing woodlands that presently buffer our homes will be protected?

Question: Does the Mountain Lakes Board of Education have any plans to install lights as part of this project?

Question: Does the Mountain Lakes Board of Education have any plans to install a sound system as part of this project?

Question: What guarantees will be placed to ensure that no lighting, or PA system is installed in this new field?

Answers:

The field will be used by Mountain Lakes School District Physical Education classes, Field Day activities, Mountain Lakes athletic programs and Mountain Lakes recreational youth sports. The field will be the same size as it is right now, with sidelines also turfed for athlete and spectator safety (approximately 5 feet of turf beyond the field on either side and in the end zones). The Mountain Lakes Board of Education wants to assure the public that the new turf field will **not** have **lights** or an **amplified sound system**. No work has begun on the Pit at this time. Previously, surveyors had completed work on various District property lines. Stakes were put in temporarily to provide a visual representation of the proposed field.

Public Questions to the BOE: Scope of Project

Question: What work has been going on at the Pit field? We have seen stakes going in the ground and work happening there (potentially surveying?). Is this related to planning for the project?

Answer: No work has begun on the Pit at this time. Previously, surveyors had completed work on various District property lines. Stakes were put in temporarily to provide a visual representation of the proposed field.

LOCATION

Public Questions to the BOE: Turf Location

Question: Were any other projects considered? Is there a project priority listing that the school board maintains? I know there are items from the referendum that were not able to be included but that had been identified during the long needs assessment process completed for that project. Were those projects considered? Maybe the grant was very specific about the types of projects that would be funded?

Answer: Regarding other projects, while there are many specific “big ticket” construction projects detailed in the current Long Range Facilities Plan (like roofs, HVAC, etc.), they were not applicable to this grant. Regarding 2017 referendum projects, any project not included at that time would need to go through the same evaluative process again to be considered for future funding.

Public Questions to the BOE: Turf Location

Question: Why was this project selected for this grant opportunity?

Question: How was this project selected for this grant opportunity? Were any other projects considered? What other fields were considered in this decision? Who made this decision?

Answers:

The ML Administration and Athletics Department have long hoped for a second turfed field to alleviate scheduling and overuse of our existing turf field. Without a grant opportunity like this, which is specifically for improving or upgrading outdoor spaces, there was little chance of a second field receiving a priority for BOE funding over other projects. The decision to choose the location of the second turf field is made by our administration and affirmed by the Board of Education.

Public Questions to the BOE: Turf Location

Question: What was the thought process behind choosing the Pit for this project. Was consideration given to neighbors, parking, drainage, chemical infiltration, etc. Were the fields at Halsey considered? Is it possible to consider other location options for the field now or is the grant for the Pit only?

Answer: Our school district administration and athletics professionals determined which location would provide the optimal benefit to our students, recreational organizations, and our larger community. Installing a safe turf field on the Pit provides an opportunity for three of our four schools to use the space easily for physical education, provides adequate access to recreational programs using existing parking and allows for everyone to access restroom facilities located at Wilkins Field. Regarding Halsey Field, it is also not owned by the MLSD. It is owned by the Borough and the MLSD currently leases the property at a cost of \$45,000 per year. As a result, it would be a similar situation there regarding transfer of property, complicated by the existing lease agreement.

Public Questions to the BOE: Turf Location

Question: Additionally, I know that we always talk about not having enough land for affordable housing ... but now additional land is available for a turf? I also just want to make sure that this doesn't become another problem or whatnot because the land that was said to be undevelopable is now being used for a turf (vs housing), so I just am curious if this was thought through or if we are sure this won't be an issue.

Answer: The Pit has always been used by the MLSD as an athletic field and this project is to renovate the existing field and move from a grass surface to a turf surface. The MLSD has no bearing on what lands the Borough of Mountain Lakes allows to be developed for housing and that question is best directed to the Borough.

Public Questions to the BOE: Turf Location

Question: What other fields were considered in this decision?

Answer: The Pit is the preferred location by the Mountain Lakes Athletic Staff and School District Administration. The BOE's role is to trust and affirm the decisions of our educational leadership. Additionally, this location makes the most fiscal sense. Other sites would require the removal of significantly more trees and excavation, would potentially be closer to our neighbors, and would be at a higher cost. Turfing the baseball/softball field, for instance, would be significantly more expensive (\$2.5 million) and would not result in increased access to fields; in fact, it would present challenges for teams to have access to fields. Furthermore, as the grant was awarded to the district as a whole, the Pit is centrally located to enable usage by all schools.

Public Questions to the BOE: Turf Location

HALSEY:

Question: The proposed turf field is very close to resident homes, and we are concerned about a negative impact to our quality of life with increased field usage. This is not a good location for a high-use athletic facility. Why can't the turf field be built in a different location, like Halsey Fields?

Question: Why did you choose to turf the Pit rather than Halsey Fields?

Answer: The grant that was awarded to the MLSD requires that the turf is on BOE-owned property. The MLSD **does not own any portion of Halsey Field**. Halsey Field is leased to the BOE for \$45,000/year by the Borough of Mountain Lakes. There are also three years left on the lease. While there are other sites that seem to be an option, the Pit is the best solution as identified by our educational professionals with regard to specific student, educational and recreational needs.

Public Questions to the BOE: Turf Location

SIDE FIELD:

Question: Regarding the turf field installation, did you all consider installing the turf on the field at the left front of the high school? It seems that location would eliminate the parking concerns that would be created at the Pit, as well as eliminate the complication of acquiring the Borough-owned land.

Answer: Regarding the field to the side of the high school, it is in far closer proximity to homes on Wilcox Drive than the Pit and would require the removal of more trees and significant excavation. Currently, the MLSD uses that land for high school activities.

Public Questions to the BOE: Turf Location

BASEBALL FIELD:

Question: If the grant was awarded to MLHS, would it make sense to turf a field that is on the MLHS property? The baseball/softball field located in the back of the high school also serves both boys and girls soccer for the freshman classes as well as the entire high school gym classes. I know there are several high schools that do have a turf/multi-purpose field on school property that several teams can benefit from...Morris Catholic is one local example.

ANSWER: The second turfed surface will add a field, and the use of the high school baseball/softball field was not considered due to several considerations including a doubled cost (approximately \$2.5 million) and the limited use for lacrosse teams which play in the same season as baseball/softball. Turfing the JV/Briarcliff baseball/softball field was also a higher priced option, will also affect scheduling for the high school softball/baseball field, and is in much closer proximity to homes than the Pit.

PLANS AND EXECUTION

Public Questions to the BOE: Plans and Execution

Question: What are the exact plans for this project? Is it only the installation of a new field surface? Will other things be installed (e.g., sheds, bleachers, press box)? Will any impermeable surface be added? Is the plan to expand the current field?

ANSWER: Right now, as the MLSD does not own the land, we have not engaged officially with a firm to produce detailed architectural or land use plans for the project. It is imperative to first secure ownership of the property before engaging service providers as **the estimated cost to produce the various project and architectural plans exceeds \$150,000**. Any money expended without completing the project would not be covered by the grant. There will be no additional impervious coverage, lighting, or sound amplification, and a press box will not be erected. The footprint of the existing field will remain the same. Installation will include the turf and a protective netting to prevent sports equipment from entering the wooded area on the Wilcox side.

Public Questions to the BOE: Plans and Execution

Question: I do not understand how more detailed project plans are not available at this stage in the project. Can't school officials provide something more detailed for the Borough and community members to review? This is a big decision with a potentially significant impact on neighboring property owners.

ANSWER: The MLSD is working diligently with the Borough of Mountain Lakes to expedite the ownership question of the property in order to engage a firm and obtain all the proper plans, studies and documentation. **Again, the estimated cost to produce the various project and architectural plans exceeds \$150,000.** Any money expended prior to working out the ownership of the property would be lost should the property not be conveyed to the MLSD. Once ownership has been determined and finalized, plans will be completed. As the Pit has been used for athletic practices for decades, property owners should be able to observe and understand the use of the field, and imagine it as a renovated version of the existing uneven ground surface with turf covering it instead.

Public Questions to the BOE: Plans and Execution

Question: Will this project require State permits and/or Planning Board review?

ANSWER: The State of New Jersey will have to approve any plans and issue all permits for the project. This includes ensuring all of the environmental requirements for the state of New Jersey are met. Once state approval and any mitigation to receive these approvals is met, any plans, designs and information obtained in connection with the turf project will be shared publicly.



DRAINAGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL

Public Questions to the BOE: Drainage and Environmental

Question: How will drainage be handled? Will water run-off be an issue for residents who live on Wilcox Drive? Who is liable for any drainage issues created by this project? There are several issues with drainage already on Wilcox. What is the plan to prevent run-off water to the residents with homes that back up to the Pit?

ANSWER: There is an existing drainage system that the proposed field would tie into with expanded capacity. The new field will have a cache basin drainage system in place to accommodate the necessary capacity to prevent turf loss and flooding. When we embark on the design portion of this project, which will include topographical and drainage studies, all details will be shared with the Borough and public as well. It is our plan to have the architect or other appropriate official attend an upcoming BOE meeting and provide a presentation to the community regarding the drainage. In addition, the State requires such plans and the State will have to approve the plans, encompassing all of the environmental requirements in place for NJ.

Public Questions to the BOE: Drainage and Environmental

Question: Wilcox Drive neighbors report that many Borough-owned trees were removed recently (within the last 2 years?), and now the homeowners who abut the field can see through the wooded buffer when in the past the woodlands provided a visual barrier to the field. Why were these trees removed and was the field expanded at this time? How many trees were taken down?

ANSWER: Approximately 10 to 12 trees, marked by the Borough arborist and taken down by BOE officials, were removed because they were dead and posed a danger to the community. There is an Ash blight in northern New Jersey, which has an impact on the trees in this area. There has been no expansion of the Pit field.

Public Questions to the BOE: Drainage and Environmental

Question: What is the location of the seven trees that will be removed for the project? Can those specific trees be identified?

ANSWER: Regarding the planned tree removal, seven (7) trees have been identified. It is important to note that 4 of the 7 are dead and need to be removed anyway for the protection of the children playing on the existing field. The others are less than 10” in diameter. Additional trees will be planted once the project commences by the MLSD.

Public Questions to the BOE: Drainage and Environmental

Question: If we plan on putting in turf vs having grass, what types of materials are available to be put in? Specifically, I'm concerned about any of the materials that are linked to cancer and PFAS pollution in our lakes and well water, etc. I would like to make sure we approach this in a way that ensures the safety of our kids, our community, etc... even if that means going with a more expensive material, etc.

ANSWER: The materials being considered are synthetic and recycled, and turf drainage systems are specifically designed to hold the materials on the field. The plan is to use materials that are very similar to what is currently in use on Wilkins Field (a.k.a. "The Turf"). The BOE will also publicly inform the community once a decision has been made regarding the turf materials.

Public Questions to the BOE: Drainage and Environmental

Question: What is the plan to prevent run-off water to the residents that homes back up to the Pit? There were several issues with drainage already with the right of way path to Wilcox .

Question: There are current flooding issues during heavy rainfall, and we are concerned that these issues will worsen with an artificial field. What plans are there to guarantee the safety of the properties on Wilcox, which all topographically lie below the present grass field?

Question: Will a formal engineers report be presented to address our concerns and when will this be publicly available for residents to review?

ANSWER: When we embark on the design portion of this project, which will include topographical and drainage studies, all details will be shared with the Borough and public as well. It is our plan to have the architect or other appropriate official attend an upcoming BOE meeting and provide more details regarding drainage. In addition, the State requires drainage plans and the State will have to approve the plans, encompassing all of the environmental requirements in place for NJ. The Wilcox path will not be included in any drainage studies related to the Pit.

Public Questions to the BOE: Drainage and Environmental

Question: What are the environmental and health impacts of artificial turf fields? What specific turf material will be used?

Question: What guarantees will be put in place to ensure the runoff, is not toxic to plants or people lying below the field?

ANSWER: The BOE will inform the community once a decision has been made regarding the turf materials. The current plan is that materials used will be very similar to what are currently in use on Wilkins Field (a.k.a. “The Turf”).

NOTIFICATION

Public Questions to the BOE: Notification

Question: Have all of the residents of Wilcox that back up to Pit been properly notified? And if so, how were they notified?

Question: Have the residents who abut the property been properly notified? If so, were they notified directly?

Question: We are also concerned because no prior notification was sent to us regarding these proposed plan. We were not made aware that surveyors would be walking through our backyards and that town meetings were being held. As the residents who will be most affected by this project, the lack of transparency is troublesome. We would like to be assured that letters will be sent out so we can be officially notified of any town meeting regarding the project.

Answer: There is no requirement to formally notify any surrounding residents regarding the installation of the turf. That said, once the BOE was relatively certain the grant would be awarded there was discussion of the planned turf at a public November, 2024 BOE meeting and a presentation at the December, 2024 meeting. In addition, the Borough Council has held two public meetings and discussed the plan to turf the Pit.

The image features a white background with a dark blue horizontal bar at the top and a vertical orange bar on the left side. A solid orange circle is positioned in the top right corner. The text "THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!" is centered in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

DISCLAIMER:

The information provided in this document is for general informational purposes only and should not be construed as professional advice. While we strive to ensure that the information is correct, we make no warranties or representations about the completeness, reliability, or accuracy of this information and such information is subject to change as the project proceeds.