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Dear BOE and BOSE members,

In recent months, South Orange Maplewood School District (SOMSD) leaders have predicted a “[fiscal cliff](#)” in future budget years, and potentially extensive cuts. Yet the Board of Education recently presented [four options](#) for building a roughly three acre multipurpose synthetic turf sports complex at Columbia High School’s Ritzer Field. Some of their options cost over \$5 million. Annual debt service for these options would be around \$650,000 per year for 10 years; then we’d need to borrow more for replacement turf. This is on top of the current annual principal and interest payments of \$13 million. Is this the time to add to SOMSD’s \$180+ million debt?

Ritzer is currently a grass field that is used heavily by multiple sports, Phys Ed classes including the “Project Adventure” high ropes course, and other activities such as band practice, concerts, and lunch. But there isn’t even a spigot for watering the grass at Ritzer. Having never received maintenance besides mowing, it is uneven, compacted, and has divots. Unsurprisingly, this has led to complaints from coaches, athletes and their families about the poor conditions, which have caused games to be cancelled during and after rain. Compared to other communities, the field is embarrassing.

Grass can provide the high performance our athletes deserve. Synthetic turf is not necessary to meet the district’s needs. A properly maintained grass field can be high functioning, including in times of rain, and can meet a high usage schedule. In addition, grass is more flexible, sustainable, and fiscally responsible. Grass provides cooling and flood control. Turf, on the other hand, has negative consequences for both environmental and human health. Neighboring towns such as Glen Ridge maintain a turf field like our Underhill, but also grass sports fields that get similar hours of play to Ritzer (as much as 1040 hours per year), at a fraction of the cost of installing and maintaining a new turf field.

Two of the proposed turf plans will convert essentially all current field space available to CHS students into a gated synthetic turf athletic complex. Students will have basically no green space on which to socialize, eat lunch or de-stress. In addition, the proposed plans reduce the flexibility of the field, and will disrupt or displace the many sports and activities currently utilizing the space, including Project Adventure, one of CHS’s most popular Phys Ed classes.

The plans also propose to remove many mature trees that are essential for cooling and absorbing stormwater. It will take decades before new trees mature to provide these services, and we need them today.

Negative environmental and health impacts of synthetic turf include [extreme heat](#) (up to 170°F), stormwater flooding, microplastics, and the [presence of PFAS](#) (forever chemicals with serious health impacts). More negative information emerges weekly, and turf manufacturers are [lobbying hard to suppress it](#).

Ritzer Field's existing soil and grass surface can be rejuvenated for a fraction of the price of synthetic turf, with none of the financial or environmental risks. Using Glen Ridge's spending experience, maintaining a grass field at Ritzer will cost approximately \$25,000/year. While we'd prefer the district to produce their own serious estimate, we prepared [approximate costs for initial improvement and ongoing maintenance](#).)

The BOE has never even investigated the possibility of improving the existing natural grass athletic field. Instead, they have a construction estimate for a completely *new* grass field at Ritzer - an expensive and unnecessary step. Yet it is the Board's fiduciary responsibility to ensure that all reasonable options are considered before spending large sums of public money during severe budget constraints.

In conclusion, a well-maintained natural grass field can provide a high performance space for athletics including team sports, provide green space for *all* students, is fiscally prudent, and does not impair environment or health. We, members of the South Orange and Maplewood community, request that the BOE and BOSE consult an experienced grass field management expert to investigate improvement and proper maintenance of the existing grass field. SOMSD should then implement such a plan for a period of one year, after which the status of the field and its usage can be re-evaluated.

This is the responsible thing to do, for our children's health, for our community's sustainability, and for our tax dollars.

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