

Athletic Fields in Ipswich
Findings of the Athletic Fields Study Committee
September, 2007

Introduction and Summary

The Board of Selectman appointed an Athletic Fields Study Committee (AFSC) in November 2004 to review the adequacy of the Town's existing recreational facilities to meet the demands of the town's various active recreation programs. It has become increasingly evident over the past several years that the number of sports activities and participants has grown significantly in Ipswich, and that the number of town owned fields available to support active recreation is inadequate. The Town of Ipswich has identified opportunities for active recreation, including field-based sports, as an important goal to enhance the quality of life in Ipswich. In particular, the Town of Ipswich—Outstanding Quality of Life Vision Descriptors & Objectives document, and the Open Space and Recreation Plan for the Town of Ipswich 2006, identify acquisition of open space for active recreation opportunities as key objectives. Over the course of the last two years the AFSC has surveyed the town's sports programs (town and school based), inventoried the available athletic fields, inventoried the use of those fields by the sports programs, developed an assessment of the current availability of athletic fields, developed an estimate of the number of athletic fields required to meet current needs, and evaluated the inventory of currently owned undeveloped Town property for suitability for playing fields. The following report outlines the methodology, findings and recommendations of the Committee.

Quantifying Current Use and Availability of Facilities

The AFSC analyzed both school sports leagues and town sports leagues organized by volunteers, since these leagues work cooperatively in coordinating the use and scheduling of available field space in town. School and municipal-owned fields are generally shared across the sports leagues.

Scheduling the use of the fields occurs each fall and spring when the Town Recreation Director calls a scheduling meeting. All organized youth and adult sports programs that plan to use municipal and/or school fields during the spring, summer or fall seasons are invited to attend. Master schedules are worked out dividing the available athletic fields among the various town-based organizations and the School Department. These plans are then revised as necessary to accommodate unforeseen changes in needs as the year passes. The school teams always have priority for school and municipal facilities. In the summer season, when most youth and school sports are not in operation, individual or independent athletic groups schedule directly with the Recreation Department for daily or weekly sessions. The current field needs required by the high demand that exists dictates nearly constant seasonal use of all available athletic fields in town. The current scheduling system has been in place for many years and it makes the best out of a challenging situation.

Currently there are five major sports that are the predominant users of fields. These sports are soccer, football, baseball, softball and lacrosse. Within the town sports programs (not School programs) there are 10 leagues, with over 1500 players, ranging from ages 5 to over 50 spread across these five sports (see Attachment A Town Leagues). In addition, three of the five major sports have grown considerably in the last few years. The growth sports are soccer, lacrosse and softball.

For example, softball has grown from four to seven teams in the Ipswich Little League, and from one to two teams for travel softball for girls ages 11-14. This total increase to nine teams means the overall number of softball teams has almost doubled in the past two years. Lacrosse has shown considerable growth as well over the past few years. The youth lacrosse program has fielded three boys and two girls teams since 2003. In the 2006 season, a third girl's team was added. There are approximately one hundred thirty youths participating in the program in 2006, up from seventy-five youths in 2004.

Currently all sports leagues (town based and school based) have field access at six areas in town, which are Municipal and/or School Department owned properties that have one or more playing fields. The total number of available fields at these areas is twenty-two, four of which are multipurpose fields, and eleven of which are baseball/softball fields, plus six small sized and one mid-sized practice fields. Available fields are found at Green Street (Town Hall), Bialek Park, Pavilion Park, Mile Lane, Doyon School, and the Middle/High Schools. These fields are a combination of multipurpose fields (i.e. use for multiple sports) and baseball diamonds, with the exception of Pavilion Park, which contains a single small sized field suitable only for practice. The soccer fields at Doyon and Bialek Park are located in the outfields of baseball diamonds. Two of these properties are under Municipal care, and five of these are under School Department care (see attachment B Fields Schedule).

In addition to the municipal and school owned and managed properties, athletic teams in town are allowed use of private fields at Raymond Fields on Essex Road/ RT 133, the YMCA on County Road, and New England Biolabs Fields on County Road /RT 1A. These properties provide an additional seven soccer fields, five of which are small sided. While the landowners have been generous in allowing the town use of the fields, they are privately owned and can be removed from the town's use at anytime. The travel soccer program has used Raymond Fields for eight years. However the program has been given notice that these fields will no longer be available at the end of the spring 2007 season, although this termination date has currently been withdrawn. The soccer program using these fields has received two termination extensions in the past.

The in-town soccer program has traditionally used the fields on what is now New England Biolabs Inc. Biolabs has had a significant construction project at their facility and that work temporarily eliminated the use of those fields. As of the fall 2005/spring 2006 season the in-town soccer has been able to use a reduced and limited amount of fields at Biolabs. Having access again to the fields at Biolabs has addressed the in-Town soccer program needs in the most minimal and tenuous circumstances. The document that specifies the details of use for these private fields is very restrictive and puts unusual pressure on Ipswich Youth Soccer to strictly adhere to the traffic regulations on the property. Failure to adhere to these constraints could lead to terminating access to these fields at the owner's discretion.

These private fields, together with the municipal and school owned fields, are shared by a total of eight different town and school based sports, over three seasons, comprising youth and adult participants totaling over 2,000 people. Management and maintenance of these fields are shared in some variation amongst the School Department, the Parks and Cemeteries Division, the sports leagues and/or the private landowners (see Attachment B).

The last new fields to be developed in Ipswich were those built in 1999 by the School Department at the Mile Lane complex as part of the new Middle/High School development. These new fields did not really add to the playing fields inventory, as the new fields were developed to replace fields taken over by the footprint of the new school buildings. The last development of additional fields in Ipswich occurred in the 1960s as a result of the building of the Doyon School on Linebrook Road. Prior to 1960, it is unclear when the town last added to its athletic field inventory.

Due to the significant increase in participation and the limited number of available fields the sports programs use, particularly the town soccer and lacrosse programs, tremendous stress has been put on the existing fields in terms of both demand and overuse. Many times during the spring, fields designed for baseball or softball are not available to those sports because soccer or lacrosse teams are using them for either practices or games. Lacrosse and baseball/softball cannot be condensed into a smaller or shared space due to the liability of stray hard balls “sailing” through the area/perimeter of these fields. The high level of use of the limited number of fields also means fields are unable to be “rested”, which is preferable for both the conditions of the playing fields and the safety of the athletes. Although plans are in place to add one additional field to the school fields at Mile Lane, use at that facility has proven to be challenging as the neighborhood was under the impression that use would be restricted to weekdays for school athletics. However, now that town soccer and lacrosse programs have grown significantly, Mile Lane fields are being used on weekends as well, which has proved troublesome to some neighborhood residents. This conflict could be eliminated if the fields are reverted back to primarily school use, but as a result, town lacrosse and soccer programs would require the use of other (additional) field facilities.

Identifying Current and Future Needs

Based on the number of current sports, leagues, participants, and playing seasons in town, the AFSC has calculated that a minimum of ten additional full size, multipurpose fields are needed to alleviate the existing shortage. These ten additional fields would meet the immediate demand and reduce the scheduling conflicts and field overuse, as well as reduce the dependency on the use of private fields. The programs that would likely use these fields would be the youth travel soccer, adult soccer, youth lacrosse and school field hockey. In the longer term, to serve anticipated future demand, and continue to ease the burden of insufficient field space, eight more full size, multi-purpose fields should be added bringing the total number of available multipurpose fields to twenty-one, which includes the three existing multipurpose fields in town (see attachment C Inventory of Field Needs for itemized details). These additional fields would be utilized by both town and school sports programs. A total of eighteen new multipurpose fields would allow the town to completely eliminate the need for use of private fields, while at the same time eliminating the currently overcrowded, overused field facilities.

Multipurpose athletic fields require playing field as well as sideline space and buffer space between fields. Full sized soccer fields are about the same size as a lacrosse field (110 yards x 60 yards). Regulation sized football fields are 120 yards x 53 1/3 yards. For the purposes of estimating land requirements for fields, assume the construction of one large complex of eighteen fields that are laid out with 60 yards between each playing field. This would allow the fields to be shifted from year to year to give the turf a chance to regenerate. A line of nine fields would require approximately forty acres of land. A total of eighty acres would be needed for the eighteen new multi-purpose fields. For a single large field complex of this size a building with bathrooms and storage should be included. A concession stand should also be strongly considered, as it would serve a significant demand.

Parking would be required for players and spectators. Zoning guidelines call for two spaces per acre or one space per three participants. Parking history at the school's Mile Lane athletic fields dictate that far more parking is needed. Assuming an average of sixteen players per team, thirty-two total players per field, up to fourteen fields in simultaneous use and that each field would need spaces for thirty-five vehicles, parking for approximately five hundred cars would have to be provided. This would include the required number (nine) of handicapped spaces. Approximately four acres would be required for parking.

Given the number of fields, the field dimensions and supportive structure required, a total of ninety to one hundred acres of space is needed to serve the Town's long-term athletic field needs. In the short-term a minimum of approximately forty-five acres is needed to address immediate needs.

This plan so far has addressed the perceived needs of all turf field sports except baseball and softball. The current municipal and school baseball field facilities and surrounding property are adequate for the under 12 year old baseball leagues (Ipswich Little League). Softball fields are the same size as the Little League fields (60' between the bases) and if the current participation growth continues, we will need to expand the field inventory for softball. Except for High School Varsity and JV baseball, the school teams all currently play on municipal maintained fields.

There is a current need for the baseball programs that use the 90' baseball diamonds. Between the adult league, school teams and youth leagues, there are only three 90' diamonds available. One is at the school's Mile Lane complex, one is behind Doyon School and one is at Bialek Park. Currently, non-baseball sports use these baseball diamonds, or some portion of them as multipurpose fields. These non-baseball sports need to move off of these fields and they must be better maintained. A fourth 90' baseball field would take tremendous pressure off of the existing facilities. A 90' baseball field with parking would need approximately five acres.

There is also a current need for two additional 60' baseball diamonds for use by children in the 6-8 year old leagues. These diamonds could conceivably be built on existing grassed areas at the Green Street Fields.

If softball participation continues to expand, there may be a need for two additional softball fields. These would be 60' diamonds and have to be built on acquired land. Approximately four acres would be needed and that would include space for two fields and off street parking.

Conclusion

Based on information collected about field-based sports demand in Ipswich the AFSC believes that additional fields are needed for organized athletic activities and that these needs are based on documented, existing needs not a “more is better” or “one can never have enough” approach. The AFSC feels strongly that a long-term solution, and not just a stopgap measure to address the current demand, is the correct course of action for the Town to take. The AFSC clearly recognizes the significant task the Town will face in trying to meet this need. The committee did devote an extensive effort in evaluating the Town owned inventory of land to determine if property existed, which could support playing fields. However other than the Mile Lane property, which is School Department owned, where the committee has already moved the process forward to create one additional field, no other suitable Town owned land was identified, with the exception of the Green Street fields, which are being contemplated. Land availability and acquisition costs, as well as field construction and maintenance costs, present significant financial hurdles. Understanding this however, the Town has an expressed commitment (see Open Space and Recreation Plan for the Town of Ipswich 2006) to provide adequate facilities for active recreation for a growing number of structured athletic programs, serving both youth and adults.

The Athletic Field Study Committee urges the Board of Selectman, the Open Space Committee, the Recreation Department, The Finance Committee, as well as other relevant Town Boards and Committees, and the community at large, to support the steps necessary to provide the documented need of additional athletic playing fields. This can be accomplished through collaboration with the Open Space Program Manager in pursuing prospective parcels for acquisition through the Open Space Bond. It is anticipated that any costs related to field complex construction would be funded separately through a combination of public and private funding, and the appropriate town department, i.e., Parks & Cemeteries, would take on the maintenance of those fields, once established.