

Testimony in Opposition to LD 1177

April 9, 2025

Chair Teplar, Chair Doudera, and esteemed members of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee:

As the Athletic Director for the Biddeford School Department, I strongly oppose LD 1177, which would impose a three-year moratorium on synthetic turf installations across Maine. This legislation undermines the principle of local control that should govern these important community decisions.

In Biddeford, our decision to install synthetic turf followed a comprehensive local evaluation process that weighed multiple factors:

- Our environmental assessment revealed that synthetic turf eliminates the need for fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides that can leach into local waterways
- We calculated significant reductions in water usage—a growing concern as our climate changes
- We considered the carbon footprint of regular mowing and maintenance required by natural grass fields
- The safety of our student-athletes improved as our previous natural surface became dangerously hard during dry periods and excessively muddy during wet seasons
- We've seen significantly increased participation rates across all age groups, particularly among youth programs
- Weather-related cancellations have dropped dramatically, allowing for more consistent athletic programming
- Extended seasonal use has provided additional months of activity, promoting year-round physical fitness
- We've been able to host regional tournaments and events, bringing economic benefits to our community
- Our field has allowed us to assist neighboring communities during their field renovations or upgrades

While I support the committee's interest in studying environmental impacts, imposing a moratorium before completing the study could suggest a predetermined outcome. If the goal is truly to gather information, why not conduct the study without restricting local control in the meantime? This approach would respect the democratic process while still advancing our understanding of health and environmental considerations.

Additionally, as someone directly responsible for student safety, I must emphasize that this moratorium would create serious safety concerns. Fields that currently need replacement would be forced to remain in deteriorating condition for three years, potentially causing injuries to thousands of Maine students. It would be irresponsible to knowingly subject our student-athletes to these preventable risks.

It's important to recognize that these decisions are already extensively studied at the local level. Before any community moves forward with synthetic turf, thorough research and deliberation take place involving environmental experts, health professionals, and community stakeholders. Furthermore, communities have direct democratic input through public hearings, school budget votes, and construction bond approvals. This established process allows communities to make informed decisions based on the extensive studies and literature that has occurred nationwide. LD 1177 would effectively override these local voting rights and silence community voices.

Both Democrats and Republicans have historically championed local control as a cornerstone of effective governance. This principle recognizes that one-size-fits-all mandates from Augusta rarely account for the diverse needs of communities from York to Fort Kent. Local officials are directly accountable to voters and taxpayers, creating a responsive system that works best when communities retain authority over infrastructure decisions.

I respectfully urge committee members across party lines to reject this state intervention into local decision-making and instead support resources that help communities make informed, responsible choices while preserving the fundamental principle of local control.

I Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Dennis Walton
Athletic Director
Biddeford School Department