

TRENDING

Central Tech field closed to determine whether soil is contaminated

Public school board hosts a public meeting on Dec. 17

By Justin Skinner

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The field at Central Technical School is being considered for a winter dome, which has residents in the area coming divided. - Photo/STAFF



Dog-walkers, joggers and other residents in the Harbord Village area were shocked to find the field to Central Technical School fenced off this week.

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The field was closed down after an environmental assessment done in preparation for plans to replace the field with artificial turf and possibly install a weather-proof dome in winter turned up a number of contaminants in the soil. The plan to renovate the field is part of a larger initiative to build six championship sports fields across the city.

Both the field's closure and the plan to renovate the field have raised some concerns in the neighbourhood.

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"It was a surprise to all of us, though maybe it shouldn't have been," said Tim Grant, chair of the Harbord Village Residents' Association. "The field was created in 1969 or so and a number of houses and other buildings were demolished to make way for it."

Grant noted that while planting trees with the local tree committee in recent years, he came to realize the soil was not exactly forgiving.

"You couldn't dig more than a few inches into the soil before hitting bricks, rocks and rubble. It looks like they tore down the houses but didn't bother to bulldoze the basements. They just put grass over it."

Grant said the contaminants, which included unsafe levels of chemical compounds, lead, zinc and other heavy metals, could have come from any variety of sources back before the field was built.

"There may have been an auto body on that piece of land, and the residents burned coal and just dumped the residue in their backyards," he said.

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The closure of the field is a blow to the community, particularly given the lack of green space in the area. Grant noted that the community has enjoyed free access to the field during non-school hours for years.

"Even at 10 o'clock on a Saturday night, you'll see 25 people on that (running) track," he said. "It's the largest open green space in the area."

Many residents in the area are concerned that the field's renovation will mean less free time for residents as it will be closed off or permitted out to other user groups during hours when the community would have normally been able to use the space.

"Right now, that space is irreplaceable," Grant said.

"The TDSB is working with a company called Razor Management, who did a similar project in Monarch Park (in East York.) I'm sure they'll use the same model they used there – that just makes sense – which means there will be fees charged to community members to use the space when they want to use the track or the field when it's not leased."

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He noted that the field has been open to the public essentially full-time after 5 p.m. on weeknights and all day on Saturday and Sunday.

Grant added that a winter dome would obscure the west-facing façade of the school, which he said is "the most significant heritage building on Bathurst Street between Dupont and Queen Street."

TDSB chair and Trinity-Spadina trustee Chris Bolton said the plans for the field are still in early days and that a policy on public use has yet to be determined.

"At this point, we're trying to put the whole thing together," he said. "But now the whole project's been put on hold because of the soil (contamination.) We met with the (city's) Committee of Adjustments about the project and had to ask to have it deferred until January until we can have people look more closely at the soil contamination."

He noted that independent contractors have been hired to conduct tests to determine the level and types of contaminants in the soil before deciding on next steps.

He acknowledged that the installation of turf and a dome has some drawbacks, but said that at public meetings that have been held to discuss the situation, most members of the public have appeared to support the plan.

"People who walk their dogs on the field understand that if there's artificial turf, they won't be able to walk their dogs there anymore," he said.

"From my experience, though, about 80 per cent of the people we've talked to about the plan have appeared to be tacitly in favour of it or completely in favour of it."

Bolton added that there have been many misconceptions regarding the field and he hopes future public consultation meetings help to shore up many of the concerns. For the time being, however, he said the most important thing is determining how safe the soil currently is at Central Tech.

"My first concern is for the safety of the kids who are using or who are going to use that field," he said.

A public meeting regarding the field will be held at Central Tech at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 17.



Justin Skinner is a former reporter with toronto.com and Metroland Media Toronto.