

Kinnelon makes progress in turf war

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Suburban Trends

Kinnelon just got a boost from Trenton in its efforts to install an artificial turf field in the borough.

Although there are still hurdles to jump before the borough can realize an artificial turf field, one barrier was removed on Monday when the state Assembly's Environment and Solid Waste Committee agreed to release from committee a bill that would grant exemptions to municipalities for some Highlands Act restrictions. The bill, A-3541, would exempt towns from the lengthy and arduous process of obtaining a permit under the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act.

Councilman James Freda, who chairs the council's Recreation Committee, and Councilman Ronald Mondello, who has pressed legislators for an exemption from faux turf field restrictions, went before the Environment and Solid Waste Committee on Monday to answer questions, and also to try to convince the committee to release the bill for an Assembly vote. Although Kinnelon and other towns located in the Highlands preservation zone where building is prohibited cannot install artificial turf fields, both public and private schools are exempt from this restriction.

Mondello said representatives of environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, and Elliott Ruga, senior policy analyst for the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, opposed the release of the bill, but in the end the committee wound up voting unanimously to release it.

Freda said that Mondello argued that private and public schools, hospitals, and religious institutions are exempt from the restrictions, which makes it difficult to understand why municipalities are excluded from exemption. Freda brought photos of Kinnelon's mud and rock-laden fields. Freda emphasized that the borough's fields never have time to recuperate because of constant use that could be alleviated by the installation of an artificial turf field. He also presented the committee with figures regarding how many children and sports programs use the fields.

"I told them that Kinnelon is proud to be a steward of the state's water supply, but our children should not be punished because of it," Mondello said.

Mondello noted that the companion Senate bill still must be released from committee. After

listening to the presentation made by Kinnelon representatives, Assemblywoman Holly Schepisi agreed to be added to sponsors of the Assembly bill. Mondello said some argued that a limit should be placed on the number of exemptions a municipality could have for artificial turf schools, which might be an avenue of compromise if it would mean quicker passage of the bill by the full Assembly and Senate, said Mondello.

Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroce and Assemblyman Jay Webber were sponsors of the bill that sat in the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee, and immediately issued a statement upon the committee's agreement to approve the bill for release.

"This legislation represents an opportunity to level the playing field for municipalities that are restricted by the Highlands Act from installing artificial turf for their residents," said DeCroce, who noted there are 88 municipalities and portions of seven counties in the Highlands Region. "The conditions of the municipal fields in some towns in the preservation area are deteriorating and often unusable and unsafe.

"It is ironic that the schools can install the turf or make field improvements, but the towns can't," said DeCroce in a press release. "If the residents want to upgrade their municipal fields to a more durable surface, they should be allowed to do so. Affording municipalities the same exemption that schools already enjoy is common sense and something property taxpayers deserve."

"The Highlands Act remains a model of unfairness and arbitrariness, and represents the worst government land grab against our communities in New Jersey history," said Webber in the release issued by the Republican Assembly office. "This legislation injects a bit of reasonableness into otherwise bad policy. It offers our local communities a fair opportunity to provide safe and durable ball fields on open space, and puts local property taxpayers back in charge of a decision that affects their own welfare."

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