

Changes allowing Kinnelon to build artificial turf fields in Highlands pass state Assembly

Monday, July 1, 2013

BY DEBORAH WALSH

STAFF WRITER

Suburban Trends

The state Assembly Environmental and Solid Waste Committee's OK to release a bill that would ease Highlands restrictions for municipalities wanting to build artificial turf fields has been rapidly followed by an affirmative vote by the full Assembly.

On June 10, the Assembly Environmental and Solid Waste Committee unanimously voted to release the bill from Committee. On June 24, the full Assembly approved A-3541 by a vote of 77 to 1. In order for the legislation to become law, it must also be approved by the state Senate and signed by the governor.

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. 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. Kinnelon is seeking parity with the schools.

After receiving word of the Assembly vote, Councilman James Freda, the council's recreation committee chairman, said, "Of course we're excited.

"Secondly, the New Jersey Highlands Coalition has agreed to work with us on wording that would work for the Highlands Coalition and the town, which I think is a homerun. They know we have a need and are willing to work with us," he said.

Freda said borough officials will meet next week with Elliott Ruga, senior policy analyst for the Highlands Coalition. Ruga initially cast some objections when the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee agreed to release the bill from committee for a full Assembly vote.

Reacting to the Assembly's passage of the bill, Mayor Robert Collins said the fact that the bill

had bipartisan sponsorship probably aided in its passage. Senator Robert Gordon (D-38) of Fair Lawn sponsored the bill and Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroce and Assemblyman Jay Webber R-26 have co-sponsored the bill.

"I'm encouraged that the state Assembly has seen the importance of this bill. I think it removes some of the burden and allows municipalities to decide what's best for its residents," said Collins.

Collins cautioned, however, even if the bill becomes law, the borough will still be subject to state Department of Environmental Protection wetlands restrictions that will bar the borough from allowing runoff to enter trout production water ways, which in effect would eliminate some of the borough's fields from being considered for artificial turf.

This includes the municipal field adjacent to the municipal building and the Boonton Avenue Field next to the Taylortown Reservoir. Collins also said the borough has not made a final determination on the installation of artificial turf, the funding of such upgrades and whether it would be party to a referendum vote.

Collins said he spoke to Assemblywoman DeCroce, who informed him that normally a companion bill goes before the Senate once the Assembly passes the bill.

"I think it's encouraging and an important step in removing some of the municipality's burden, but it is not the be-all and end-all. We still are faced with a lot of issues," he said.

Email: walshde@northjersey.com

© 2013 North Jersey Media Group