

**House Bill 1098**  
***Use of Public Funds - Playground and Athletic Field Surfaces***  
**Authorizations, Preferences, and Prohibitions**  
*(Safe and Healthy Field Act)*

Position: **Oppose**

Date: March 5, 2020

From: Amanda Hof, Executive Director  
Howard County Tourism Council, Inc.

The Howard Tourism Council, Inc. has the following concern regarding HB 1098.

Program Open Space (POS) funds, in many jurisdictions, are the sole funding source for land acquisition, and the construction of playgrounds, sports fields and courts, pathways and other recreational amenities. Most importantly, in every jurisdiction, these funds supplement capital budgets on some level to meet the local demands for services.

By establishing a preference to provide State funds to only those jurisdictions who are able to use and afford state-of-the-art natural surface materials to build a new or replace an existing playground or athletic field surface, is very injurious to those smaller jurisdictions who cannot afford the natural materials and who rely on POS money as their monetary foundation when developing their budget. This preference will set things back from a maintenance perspective as well and will also take away the ability for jurisdictions to be flexible in their spending. In addition, this will result in the need to substantially increase funding allocations to cover the rising costs of state-of-the-art natural surface materials afforded by the new technology.

Sports tourism and economic benefit for jurisdictions will also be affected. Without having the flexibility of POS funds to expand and maintain synthetic turf athletic fields, the amount of play on a field and revenue that can be generated will greatly affect Howard County and other MD jurisdictions.

Howard County hosts around 120 outside groups annually including national tournaments for soccer, lacrosse, cricket, and even quidditch (as in Harry Potter). All events induce spending in dining establishments, retail, transportation (fuel), and services. Larger regional and national events fill our hotels as well as surrounding areas' hotels. Likewise, when surrounding jurisdictions host large events the spending overflows into Howard County. According to the Maryland Sports Commission, 3,500 sporting events over 10 years brought 1.7 billion dollars in directing spending on Maryland's economy. A recent economic impact exercise by Elite Tournaments suggests that nine soccer tournaments in 2018 played entirely or partially in Howard County yielded a \$22.1 million in direct visitor spending, \$15.3 million of the spending took place in Howard County.

In order to continue to leverage tourism spending from outside groups, Howard County needs to grow its inventory of available facilities to accommodate more events. Increased costs to our facility stewards will have an adverse effect and ultimately put Howard County and like jurisdictions at a competitive disadvantage in attracting outside groups and hinder tourism spending.

Allowing state and local POS allocations to be used for maintenance and upkeep of only natural grass fields is not sustainable, especially during a rainy season and for jurisdictions with high demand for more fields and more use. My personal experience with tournament planners is that they prefer our synthetic surfaces as it provides consistency and is resilient to weather conditions lessening the need to cancel an event for rain.

Additionally, by eliminating rubber safety surfacing for playgrounds, the ease of children with disabilities accessing playgrounds and other park amenities will be affected. Rubber safety surfacing provides a consistent surface for falls.

As a parent, I can personally attest to the benefit of rubber safety surfacing. My daughter, when six years old, tried her hand at the monkey bars at Atholton Park. She lost her grip, fell to the ground and broke her elbow on the partial mulch/partially dirt surface. At first sight of my daughter holding her elbow, the receptionist at the emergency room said, "monkey bars?", which indicated to me this type of fall was common. While the mulch was an approved surface according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission's playground safety standards, it is unarguably subject to use and environmental elements that deteriorate the mulch over time. Mulch and wood chips also have a way of making its way into children's shoes and clothes and is very difficult to remove. I was relieved when the Atholton Park playground was resurfaced with the rubber safety surface.

Last, conflicting language in the bill makes it unclear as to whether the bill is referring to any State Funds as written on page 5, in section (C) (1) or certain funds under Program Open Space as written on the first page, line 5.

Please consider the consequences of this proposed legislation will have.

Respectfully submitted,

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