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MAYOR

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HB 1098

March 5, 2020

TO: Members of the House Appropriations Committee

FROM: Nicholas Blendy, Deputy Director of Government Relations

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

POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENT

Chair McIntosh, Vice-Chair Jackson, and Members of the Committee, please be advised that the Baltimore City Administration (BCA) **supports with amendment** House Bill (HB) 1098.

HB 1098 imposes an absolute ban on the use of state funds on any part of a project that would build a new or replace an existing playground or athletic field with a synthetic surface, which is defined as including artificial turf or any ground cover made from plastic, rubber, or tires. Given the City of Baltimore's unique position compared to other political subdivisions in Maryland—it is entirely an urban environment—the State of Maryland's Program Open Space (POS) funding program is the most significant revenue source the BCA uses on recreation and parks improvements that are specified in this bill.

The BCA advises that the Baltimore City Department of Recreation and Parks (BCRP) prefers a quality natural turf field as its first choice in construction, there are a not insignificant amount of situations where community and partner requests result in an artificial turf field being more appropriate. For example, in Baltimore City's Clifton Park, there is currently a plan moving forward on the construction of an artificial turf field and track to be installed across from the Rita Church Recreation Center. Given that POS funding is the overwhelming source of the project, it would be extremely burdensome to the BCA to start over from square one if HB 1098 were enacted without considering an exception for projects like this one already in the pipeline.

Another example of an area to consider adjusting this policy could be regarding playground surfaces. Presently, BCRP installs playgrounds that contain both rubber surfaces as well as ones that use engineered wood fiber (EWF). If it is the will of the General Assembly to eliminate rubber as an option—which appears to be the clear intent of HB 1098—perhaps the bill should be amended to clarify that EWF materials may still be eligible to be used by POS funding. Unlike woodchips, which are moved and kicked around the playground and require regular maintenance and replenishment in order to avoid fall zones from opening up, EWF is reliably safe while requiring significantly less regular maintenance.

In closing, the BCA notes that HB 1098, if enacted, would shift projects using POS funding to materials that cost more than synthetic surfaces, and necessarily that POS dollars would not stretch as far as they currently do, accordingly. However, if it is the will of the General Assembly to make it happen, please respectfully consider the following two amendments:

1. Exempting projects currently in the construction pipeline from this new restriction; and
2. Clarifying that rubber and/or engineered wood fiber is still acceptable for playground.

For the foregoing reasons, we respectfully request a **favorable with amendments** report on HB 1098.