

# Managing Privately Organized Sports on Local Fields

by David R. Lewis

A

couple of hours spent observing local organized sports such as baseball and soccer can provide an education in nuisance impacts better than most urban planning programs.

Parks and recreation activities are an essential part of a successful community. Recreational activities are often regulated by a local government's parks and recreation department, but sometimes numerous recreational activities are provided by organized sports groups that are controlled, to varying degrees, by private organizations like the Little League or the local soccer league.

These types of organizations in search of recreational land may find a school district with land that can be used under a license agreement. If agreement to use the land is reached, then a private organization uses public property for what is usually a nominal amount of rent.

Recreational land, just as any other land use type, makes an impact on the use of the surrounding land, traffic, police protection, and general safety. General compatibility issues can be a concern for public agencies.

## ONE EXAMPLE

In one particular example, a specific elementary school had a vacant field behind a school facility. School improvements allowed for parking in front of the building, which was along a collector street, with administrative offices adjacent to the primary parking area. Classrooms were located behind the administrative offices, with secondary access, and there was parking along a property line shared with a single-family residential subdivision. The subdivision extended along the school's total depth and width of side and rear property lines.

School facilities are not always under the control or regulation of local government. In this case, three baseball fields were installed in the rear portion of the school site, along with parking and driveway access. The fields were installed without environmental or professional planning oversight. Residents complained regularly of noise from loudspeakers, crowds, honking horns, dust pollution from unpaved parking, and a lack of security at night. Two of three fields are located too close to residential properties.

Over time, some improvements have been made to limit loud speaker use, to install chip seal paving and reduce dust pollution, to install a security gate that restricts access at night, and to restrict use to day-time activities. The intensity of use with three active fields, however, produces continued nuisances because of traffic load and the number of people in a limited space.

Reduction of one field to reduce impacts has not occurred. As conflicts persist, participating adults have harassed neighbors. The school district has attempted to minimize harassment by talking to the organizational leadership. What is apparent is that sports leadership continues to have problems with self regulation.

Local government officials who want to be aware of and avoid such incompatible and worrisome conditions should consider the following:

- Organized sports provide a social network with a specific and focused purpose. Sports leagues also can have an extraordinary influence in a community. At a minimum, they can rally a large number of people behind a specific cause. This may produce an imbalance that does not take into account the larger community.
- Local governments may have land that is considered surplus in the short or long term. Sports organizations will seek out land where their members can conduct activities, and to varying degrees potential



**This is an example of a poorly developed field where facilities are concentrated in too small of an area and in close proximity to a residential neighborhood. Portable toilets also provide an unsightly condition. Such practices create conflicts.**

sites may or may not be suitable. Also, conflict may develop when the local agency needs the land for the original intended use.

- Sports organizations may seek sites that are not well suited for certain activities. Their concern is sometimes only for the activity. This may include uses incompatible with the immediate area.
- An otherwise appropriate site for sports activities can become a nuisance if fields, driveways, and parking are poorly located on the site. Such activities should not be located in close proximity to residential properties. Aluminum bats are now used, and these bats

produce a high-pitch sound that travels substantial distances. Soccer involves constant use of whistles. Parking and driveways should also be set back because of engine noise and horn noise.

- It is possible that a school district may not be subject to local control according to state laws. Neighborhood concerns for the school district may not be as comprehensive as they are for a local government. Dual-agency overlap in the establishment of land uses can cause conflicts.

How can conflict be reduced to produce better relationships between a sports organization and a community?



**This field is located away from a residential subdivision. Restroom facilities are provided, and sufficient space also is provided between fields so there is better control of noise. Loud speakers are not present.**

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**Sports group—government cooperation.** Although a school district may not be subject to local government control, it should seek advice from a local government agency where its facilities are located. Local planning departments typically have planning professionals that can advise on compatibility issues, site design, noise control measures, and conflict resolution. Police and fire officials can advise on how to improve safety and minimize crime.

**Community input.** The siting of sports facilities should include community input from a variety of stakeholders. Such siting should be subject to development review, during which specific findings for approval or denial are considered. After a site is selected, the neighborhood should be involved in the design and determination of intensity of use of the facility. Public participation of stakeholders will help reduce conflicts that can persist if not addressed early and before improvements are constructed. Design criteria should take into account adjacent uses. Proper setbacks and intensity of use should also be considered.

**Licenses.** License agreements should be specific and include a termination provision if conditions cause conflict with the adjoining property owners and others who are directly affected by the facility. Avoid self-regulation provisions and hold the users accountable for violations.

**Parking.** Parking is the tail that wags the dog. Parking space must be sufficient for the intensity of use. Major events can strain neighborhood relations when parking spills into neighborhood streets. Driveways are likely to be blocked, for example, when parking becomes scarce.

**Buffers.** Parking and driveway use should be adequately set back from adjoining residential properties. Parking is not necessarily a buffer to noise from automobiles and trucks. Parking areas and driveways of the sports facilities should be paved.

**Complaints.** The local agency should have a means to address neighborhood complaints. Neighbors should not be forced to confront sports leaders and participants or be subject to con-

flicts with sports participants, who are usually adults. Confrontations can occur if structured communication is lacking. Ignoring complaints can cause an escalation in relations and produce dangerous conditions. Public agencies may become the subject of litigation.

**Loudspeakers.** Sports organizations often believe loudspeakers are essential, but loudspeakers can and often do create severe nuisances. When they are permitted, participants often make more noise themselves. Loudspeakers are not a good idea when residential uses are adjacent to sports fields.

**Night operations.** Not all sites are well located for night operations. Lights and night operations intensify impacts. Noise analysis, such as the Ldn composite noise measurement method (which determines day-night average sound level), allocates more weight for nighttime noise.

Local government agencies should be the arbiters of the proper allocation of land use resources. Managers know that the needs of all stakeholders need to be considered in order to avoid serious conflicts.

### AN OVER-THE-FENCE OBSERVATION

It does not escape those in a neighborhood that a league spent money to install fields but did not invest in items that would have created compatibility with the neighborhood. Although private sports organizations provide recreational opportunities, they also need to pay their fair share of the costs.

Their share includes payment for the use of the property and the staff time to regulate their activities. Subsidizing sports can lead to a culture of entitlement by the sports organizations. Requiring that they pay their share helps promote accountability and a sense of obligation. Public agencies and organized sports need to be fully engaged in promoting a balanced sports program.

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David R. Lewis, ASA, MRICS, SR/WA, is right-of-way section manager and a land use planner, Sonoma County, California ([DLEWIS3@sonoma-county.org](mailto:DLEWIS3@sonoma-county.org)).