



09/05/2023

Dear North Smithfield Community,

I am writing this letter to address some concerns that were expressed during Town Council and School Committee meetings, in the press, and across social media in order to clear up any misunderstandings regarding the history, renovations, and management of the North Smithfield Public Schools (NSPS) athletic complex.

The Veterans Memorial Athletic Complex is an essential asset to our students, athletic teams, and our broader community. Our goal is and has always been, to manage the athletic complex in a way that provides community access while maintaining a high-quality facility.

While costs have risen across all sectors, we have maintained the same tiered fee and rental structure for the turf field that was put in place by the School Committee in 2010 and has been in place since. In 2016, we lowered the criteria for the Group 3 non-profit membership rate from 60% North Smithfield residents, allowing even more locally-based organizations to receive a discounted rate for the rental of the athletic complex.

In 2017, the School Committee created a set-aside account holding funds generated through facility rentals specifically to apply toward the eventual replacement of the track and turf field. I want to reiterate this point. Revenue generated from the rental of our athletic complex is and has been held in reserve to be reinvested in the facility's future.

For years we managed the rentals through our facilities department. While many organizations followed procedures, booked facilities early, and paid in full, others did not. Some groups booked late and complained if their chosen dates were not available. Some groups tried to work outside of our policies and procedures wanting to "cut deals" or be issued exceptions. Some groups had to be chased for payment.

When I arrived in North Smithfield seven years ago, the field was nearing the end of its life cycle. I noted the need to replace the turf field in my annual capital request to the Town Planning Board. At an estimated one million dollars, this project was a heavy lift and continuously carried over into the following years. Meanwhile, the field continued to deteriorate. Maintenance surveys identified areas approaching levels of wear potentially unsafe for interscholastic play.

In 2020, the state went into lockdown and instruction switched to remote learning. 2021 was a hybrid year. Lockdown and remote learning meant we were not transporting students daily. We took the savings in transportation and dedicated them toward replacing the turf field and track so that we no longer needed to ask the Town for any funding assistance.

In the winter of 2021, the Town posted an RFP for field and track replacement and repair. This contract also included maintenance equipment along with training for our facilities personnel.

In July 2021 construction began and finished in the Fall of 2021 under budget.

While the field was being renovated, the Town negotiated an agreement with Greene Development to build a concession stand and bathrooms at the Veterans Memorial Stadium. Construction began in late Spring 2022 and was completed by early Fall 2022.

We had a beautiful new field with a concession stand and sanitary facilities on the way. We wanted to maximize its potential for our schools and the community. To define what we needed, we put together the following needs assessment/wish list:

- **Scheduling** - Schedule outside rentals and permits for field use and events whenever the field is not in use by North Smithfield Public Schools or Town events.
- **Concessions** - Provide licensed and approved concession services (staffing, equipment, food, point of sale) during all NSPS and non-school/rental events.
- **Bathrooms** - provide supplies and cleaning
- **Press Box** - PA system, Internet, audio, and video equipment, and live streaming.
- **Game Management** - Provide staff to ensure the safety and security of attendees during non-school events and field rentals.
- **Other** - fully insured

Moreover, we did not want this to further cost the district additional equipment purchases, installation, maintenance, repair or replacements, and licensing. Nor did we want to hire an additional custodian to conduct evening and weekend cleaning. Rather we wanted a solution that would pay the district an annual amount to be set aside and applied towards the future replacement of the turf field without having to put the total burden on the taxpayers.

We looked at vendors on the State Master Price Agreements and other purchasing consortiums. We called our counterparts in other communities hoping to find a “one size fits all” vendor who could do everything we wanted.

Right in our backyard, we had a tremendous facility and resource at Wide World of Indoor Sports (WWIS). Years ago WWIS agreed to be our school emergency evacuation site and we had a long history with them through our athletics program.

We reached out to WWIS for advice. WWIS put us in contact with Rob Bonnell as their representative. Mr. Bonnell previously had been a renter of our field for the Mach1 Futbol Club.

Our facilities director, finance director, and I met with Mr. Bonnell and outlined our needs in hopes of some information and advice. What developed out of this conversation was the seed of an idea to form a deeper partnership with WWIS.

It became apparent that WWIS had the resources and expertise and could be that “one-size fits all” vendor we were looking for. Not only was WWIS a valuable resource to the North Smithfield community; WWIS expressed their willingness to take on the management of everything on our wish list. They also took further steps and floated the idea of giving our teams free use of indoor space when inclement weather interrupted practices. They appointed Rob Bonnell as their intermediary to continue discussions.

I informed the School Committee of the potential partnership with WWIS, but first I checked with our solicitor who verified that under R.I. Gen laws 45-55-8, WWIS could be named as a Sole Source provider. I presented this to the School Committee Meeting and received approval to develop a management contract. After negotiation and review by attorneys, I presented to and received school committee approval agreeing on a one-year term as this was a new endeavor for both NSPS and WWIS, and wanted to allow both organizations time to assess its success and make adjustments.

At the core of the contract, WWIS not only agreed to provide all the management “wish list” services mentioned earlier, but also pay NSPS:

- \$ 35,000 annually
- \$70.00 per hour for every rented hour for non-district sponsored events after the first 350 hours of usage for non-district sponsored events plus an additional \$20.00 per hour for such rental times requiring lightening of the field(s). \$52.50 per hour for every rented hour for North Smithfield-based non-profit organization events (with participants being 60% or more residents) when <WWIS> is charging a reduced rate, discounted by 25%.
- \$750 per month for September, October, November, April, May, and June for the use of the concession stand

Additionally, WWIS agreed to provide:

- 20 hours of indoor facility use at WWIS in North Smithfield.
- Expand community/public use of the track during rental periods

During negotiations, we also made the allowance to keep any signage and advertisement revenue in the hands of the North Smithfield Athletic Association (NSAA) for their own fundraising efforts. To assist the NSAA even further, as a district decided to stop collecting gate receipts during school games making our athletics more accessible to families to attend, and instead allow the NSAA to take donations in in place of ticket fees.

We understand some teams want to have access to the concession stand to raise money for their teams. We prioritized access, health, and safety concerns. The vendor has a food handler’s license needed, they do background checks and comply with all food safety licenses

and insurance requirements. The vendor owns all of the equipment and products. This is all done for the safety of our children and residents. The vendor opens, closes, and cleans the bathrooms. The School Committee provides financial support to our athletes and NSAA helps our children financially in different ways. We can provide additional fundraising opportunities and are always willing to listen to any proposals to support the children.

In closing, we are proud of the Veterans Memorial Athletic Complex, the renovations we have made to date and are planning, our partnership with the Town, and with WWIS to manage the facility. We have expanded public use and accessibility, and have a beautiful, professionally run facility of which the entire community can be proud.

Michael St. Jean,
Superintendent