



April 9, 2024

Dear North Smithfield Community,

I am updating my letter from August 9, 2023, to address some concerns that have been expressed in the press and across social media 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. We also believe that we need to strike a balance between usage and efficiency in order to avoid requesting the use of additional taxpayer dollars to maintain and upgrade our athletic facilities.

To be clear, we are not aware of any North Smithfield group that has not been provided access to our field. Wide World of Indoor Sports (WWIS), the management company we have engaged, works with all organizations to provide access to the turf field. Given the increasing demand to utilize the field, some scheduling issues are inevitable. Through dialogue and compromise, these scheduling conflicts can almost always be beneficially resolved so that our North Smithfield community organizations are able to utilize the field.

I want to clarify that the management company does not make money on rentals of the field. They paid \$35,000 to North Smithfield and last year collected \$25,000, including use of their time. They paid an additional \$10,000 over fees collected. They also provide maintenance and other support. In short, they have been a good partner with our limited resources. While we may in the future consider bringing athletic facility management internally, we continue to believe this will add costs with minimal upside.

In 2023, the set-aside account held funds generated through facility rentals specifically to apply toward the eventual replacement of the track and turf field of \$57,000 and an accumulated balance of \$300,000 for replacement in the future. 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. This is smart management.

Along with promoting education as our number one goal, I would also like to list some of our accomplishments for athletics over the last 8 years. The School Committee has also authorized a

resurfaced baseball field, updating the softball field, and putting in a throwing field so that we could have home meets in track and field. We are in the process of purchasing new uniforms for most of the teams. We are proud of our children and our facilities.

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. Years ago WWIS agreed to be our school emergency evacuation site and we had a long history with them through our athletics program.

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 indoor space when inclement weather interrupted practices. They appointed Rob Bonnell as their intermediary.

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.

In the first year, some scheduling frustrations were experienced. As was to be expected given demand to utilize the facility. However, these scheduling issues were collectively resolved and all organizations received their necessary field time. Even where specific dates are in demand, we intend to continue work towards making sure that our facilities are available to all school athletics, rentals, and events.

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 (even though rentals in the past year totaled approximately \$25,000)
- \$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

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.

When the concession stand is open for school games, events, and rentals, the vendor opens, closes, and cleans the bathrooms. The vendor also cleans up the litter left behind after every rental. During the winter months, the concession stand and restrooms need to be winterized and are closed. As much as we would like to keep the restrooms open during non-game times, it has been subject to repeated vandalism. We do continue to make portajohns available to the public during times when the concession stand and restrooms are closed.

We also arranged to support the community and community organizations by:

- Continuing to keep any signage and advertisement revenue in the hands of our friends at the North Smithfield Athletic Association (NSAA) for their fundraising efforts.
- Discontinuing collecting gate receipts during school games to make our athletics more accessible to families to attend. Once again we defer to our friends at the NSAA to take donations instead of ticket fees.
- We have continued the same rental pricing structure, which has not increased in over a decade, along with ensuring reduced rates favoring town leagues that are comprised of 60% or more North Smithfield residents.

While some have criticized us for charging too much, others are criticizing us for not generating enough revenue. We want to strike a balance that supports field maintenance and eventual replacement while keeping the resource accessible to our town and community partners. We believe that the current contract with our management company does strike an appropriate balance.

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