



Wednesday, May 13, 2009

A facelift for Ames Field

Synthetic turf will replace grass, and work begins Thursday

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MICHIGAN CITY - Already considered one of the top high school football facilities in the area, Ames Field is getting a brand new look.

At Tuesday's meeting of the Michigan City Area Schools Board, a contract with Hellas Construction of Austin, Texas, to install synthetic turf at Ames was unanimously approved.

"If you're gonna have a successful athletic program, then your facilities have gotta move up," Michigan City High School athletic director Bob "Bear" Falls said.

The total cost of the project, which will begin Thursday and wrap up by July 1, is \$718,396. According to Shamus Petrucelli, regional sales representative for Hellas, the turf has an expected life span of 13 to 15 years.

"Quite naturally, that's a lot of money," Falls said. "But trying to run a program without putting money in is a very difficult thing.

"Our kids deserve to play on the very best we can offer."

Dave Williamson, director of Plant Planning, estimated the annual cost of maintaining the surface of Ames Field at \$53,000 a year. That includes an estimated \$28,000 a year for fertilizers, chemicals and fungicides; about \$10,000 per year to water the fields; and another \$15,000 for labor.

Not counted in that total would be the cost of resodding Ames. That, according to Williamson, is recommended to be done every five or six years at a cost of \$75,000. However, in Ames Field's 14-year history, it's never been resodded. According to football coach Craig Buzea, that wear and tear was evident.

"I had officiating crews tell me before games that the field could be declared unplayable," Buzea said.

Ames Field's turf had its share of problems over the years. Four years ago, a fungus attached to the field, causing massive brown blotches, some 20 or 30 yards wide.

"I think it's the right thing to do," Buzea said. "There's a reason NFL teams, colleges and high schools are doing it.

"For the board to have the foresight to do this is awesome."

City will be the fifth school in the Duneland Conference to install a synthetic turf. Merrillville, Portage, Valparaiso and Crown Point all have some version of it. It's rumored that Chesterton and Lake Central also have it in the works.

At Portage, according to athletic director Jeff Smith, the cost of the project was \$900,000, but that initial cost will be absorbed if the school gets 20 years of play out of the surface, as it expects to get.

"I think it's invaluable on a variety of levels," Smith said. "Just with the weather in Northwest Indiana, you get one rainout or monsoon rain and it tears the field up for the rest of the season.

"So from that standpoint, we've never lost a game to a rainout or field conditions."

Buzea was the football coach at Portage when the turf was installed.

"As soon as we got it in, it was the pride of the community," Buzea said.

In addition, Smith said the synthetic turf has created new revenue streams. For instance, Valparaiso University has had to rent the field on occasion when its soccer field has been unplayable. The school also rents the facility to the local Pop Warner Football program.

Those are all new possibilities for Ames Field, as well, according to Falls, although he doesn't foresee soccer being played at Ames during the upcoming fall season.

Hellas Construction (hellasconstruction.com) is the company that is installing its brand of synthetic turf at the Dallas Cowboys' new stadium. Hellas' product is called Fusion, not to be confused with similar products such as FieldTurf.

Part of the contract is the work must be completed by July 1 in advance of the annual Drum & Bugle DCI competition July 3. Petrucelli said there will be noticeable activity at Ames starting Thursday.

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