

**Darien Public Schools
Office of the Superintendent**

Report on the Stadium Field Lighting Proposal

August 29, 2006

Background Information:

A proposal to install a field lighting system at the stadium turf field and track at Darien High School was presented to the Board of Selectmen on June 5, 2006, and was subsequently presented to the Board of Education at its meeting on June 13, 2006. The proposal was developed and put forward by a group of advocates for Darien High School athletics as well as Darien youth league sports in the community. It also is our understanding that the proposal was shared with the property owners who neighbor the Darien High School campus. The group's spokesperson, Mr. Rusty Shriner, presented a detailed lighting system proposal that addressed a number of issues as seen by the proposing group, including: needs, benefits, system description, impact on neighbors, and operation guidelines. All of these topics were explained and supported by back-up details provided in a document entitled "*Darien High School Stadium Field Lights Analysis and Recommendations.*" A follow up discussion about the proposal was conducted by the Board of Education on June 27, 2006. Following those two discussions, the Board of Education instructed the Administration to further study both the need for and the implications of a lighting system at the stadium field and track. The Board requested further information regarding: (1) Analysis of the current level of demand for field usage at all athletic fields, both those controlled by the Board of Education and those governed by the Town's Department of Parks and Recreation; (2) explanation of the benefits accrued to Darien High School if such a system were to be installed; (3) an outline of the usage guidelines that would be recommended; (4) considerations relative to security, traffic, parking, and trash generation; and (5) status of the proposal regarding Town regulatory boards, including timelines. The Board directed the Administration to report back at its meeting on August 29, 2006.

Current Athletic Fields Usage Data

With the cooperation and assistance of Susan Swiatek from the Darien Park and Rec Department and with the contributions of Darien Public Schools Director of Athletics, John Keleher, detailed spreadsheets have been prepared showing the usage demands for every public athletic field in the Town of Darien over the course of one year. In addition, a spreadsheet was prepared showing the potential additional times the DHS stadium field could be available if lights were installed. (*These spreadsheets are attached as an appendix to this report.*) We have studied these spreadsheets and can summarize our findings as being that although used very heavily, Darien Athletic fields have not yet reached 100% maximum usage. Details are as follows:

1. Weekday Usage – All Town fields are fully utilized on weekdays in the fall and spring, with the exception of:
 - a. DHS field #2 available 6pm to 8 pm in the early fall
 - b. Hindley field available 6pm to 8pm in the early fall
 - c. Ox Ridge field available 4pm to 8pm in the fall
 - d. Tokeneke field closed due to construction, approx spring 2008
 - e. DHS baseball, softball, field #1 & field #3 closed for fall of 2006
 - f. DHS field #1 available 7pm to 8pm in the spring of 2007
 - g. DHS baseball field and field #3 still to be determined for spring of 2007

2. Weekend Usage – All Town fields are fully utilized on weekends in the fall and spring with the exceptions of:
 - a. Ox Ridge field available 7am to 8pm in the fall
 - b. Hindley field available 7pm to 8pm in the early fall
 - c. Tokeneke field closed due to construction, approx spring 2008
 - d. DHS baseball, softball, field #1 & field #3 closed for fall of 2006
 - e. DHS baseball field still to be determined for spring, 2007
 - f. Holahan field available 5pm to 8pm Saturday and Sunday in fall
 - g. Holahan field available 8am to 10am on Sunday in the spring
 - h. Baker field available 8am to 11am on Sunday in the fall & spring
 - i. Casey field available 8am to 11am on Sunday in the fall
 - j. Casey field available 8am to 11am & 5pm to 8pm Sunday, spring
 - k. Gallagher field available 8am to 11am on Sunday in the spring

3. Potential Lighted Stadium Usage – If a field lighting system installation gains approval, it would add the following additional field availability:
 - a. DHS Stadium field from 5pm to 8:30pm all week in fall
 - b. DHS Stadium field from 5pm to 8:30pm all week, early spring

Usage Benefits for Darien High School

Usage of the Stadium Turf Field would produce an improvement for the Darien High School athletic program. Certain Darien High School varsity teams would be able to schedule contests in the evening hours. These would likely include 4 fall football games and 2 night contests each in the fall for Girls' Soccer, Boys' Soccer, and Girls' Field Hockey. In the spring, 2 night competitions each could be scheduled for Girls Lacrosse, Boys' Lacrosse and possibly even 2 each for Girls' and Boys' Track. A lighted field also would allow Darien the competitive advantage to host home tournament games, the number of which would not be possible to identify, because it fluctuates depending upon which teams qualify for the tournament in a given season. In addition, we should be prepared to provide the field as a commitment of our FCIAC membership to allow up to 2 fall and 2 spring night games involving non-Darien teams. Further, a lighted field would allow DHS teams to have practice times available that they currently do not have

in late fall and early spring. Further, the “shifting” of games into the evenings will open up the availability of daytime fields for other use. This would be beneficial for the scheduling of clubs or intramurals, such as “ultimate Frisbee” which would have more flexibility than is currently available.

One of the most important benefits of scheduling some high school games at night is that it allows parents who work an opportunity to watch their sons and daughters compete. This would be even more meaningful when the evening game was a special rivalry or the team’s senior night. Athletes from other teams have a better opportunity to attend games as spectators. Based upon the experience of other schools, fan support at Friday night football games is better than on Saturday afternoons. Similarly, night contests make it more conducive for college recruiters to have more opportunities to observe athletes. Conversely, Friday night games free-up students on Saturday to visit colleges. Another potential benefit would allow the high school flexibility to schedule some special events, such as related to graduation or homecoming, in the early evening. Also, a lighted stadium turf field would give the option of providing relief for some of the school district’s overused fields by rescheduling some usage off those fields, such as at Holmes, Tokeneke, and Middlesex lower.

Usage Benefits for Others

There also are apparent benefits that would accrue to the many youth sports programs that operate in the community. Darien youth teams would be able to continue to practice the same number of times per week in late fall and early spring. The Darien Junior Football League, in particular because they rely so heavily on “father “ coaches would be able to continue to have regular practice sessions.

Suggested Guidelines for Use of Stadium Field Lights

The following statements are recommended as potential usage guidelines for the stadium field if the proposed lights are installed:

1. The stadium lighting system exists for the benefit of the Darien Public Schools and Darien community youth sports. First priority for stadium field use will be for the Darien Public Schools.
2. Stadium field events begin no later than 7 pm and will be scheduled to end by 9 pm, although football games may schedule to end by 10 pm. The only exception will be home tournament playoff games when starting times are dictated by our governing athletic conferences, the FCIAC and the CIAC, whose games typically start at 7 pm and end by 10 pm.

3. The following sports will be allowed to schedule sanctioned athletic contests at night, at the stadium turf field under the lights:

Football (4)	Boys' Lacrosse (2)
Girls' Soccer (2)	Girls' Lacrosse (2)
Boys' Soccer (2)	Boys' Track (2)
Girls Field Hockey (2)	Girls' Track (2)

All FCIAC and CIAC sanctioned tournament contests approved by the Darien Athletic Director for all Darien Teams that qualify and for non-Darien teams to a maximum of 6 per school year.

3. Music and the public address system will not be used except at the start of games. For football games, however, the public address system may be used throughout, and music will be permitted through halftime.

4. Other school activities, high school athletic practices, or youth sports will be permitted to use the lighting system, but those activities must be scheduled to end by 8:30 pm. Music and sound systems will not be allowed at these activities, with the exception of evening DHS marching band practices which must end by 8:30 pm.

5. Use of the lighting system would not be permitted during the summer between the closing and opening of the regular school years.

6. All exceptions to the above usage guidelines shall be made only with the approval of the Darien Board of Education.

Considerations regarding security issues; traffic; parking; trash generation:

- **Security Issues:** Paul Engemann, Director of Facilities and Construction, met with Chief Duane Lovello, Captain Gary Pavia and Lt. Donald Anderson, all from the Darien Police Department. Some potential issues related to evening events were identified. These ranged from potential "tailgating" to access between the field and the parking areas. However, it was generally felt that evening events could safely take place at the stadium field if the appropriate level of security was provided. Initially, two or three additional police officers would be utilized for on-site security, patrolling of surrounding neighborhoods and traffic control. This added police coverage could always be scaled back down if it proved unnecessary and the specific needs for coverage would be examined in advance for each individual event. As Chief Lovello put it, "Given our experience with assorted events at Darien High School, there is no reason to assume that these [evening] events can't be held safely, provided an adequate number of officers are present..." It should be noted that the Darien Police Department does not maintain any position favoring or opposing the proposed light project. Rather, they simply remain willing to work with

the school district administration on an event by event basis to identify any potential issues and to develop plans to alleviate them.

- **Traffic and Parking:** Traffic and parking were also discussed with Chief Lovello and his officers. Again, as long as adequate police coverage is provided, it is anticipated that there would be no significant problems. The attendance level at a majority of the events would not be higher than a normal Saturday afternoon football game. In addition, the annual Thanksgiving Day football game with New Canaan would most likely be the largest sporting event held at the site. However, this is traditionally held during the day and there are certainly no plans to hold it in the evening should lights be installed.
- **Trash Generation:** There should be no increase in the amount of trash generated. Whether an event is held during the day or at night, our maintenance crew performs a trash pickup following any event. This would not change for evening events.

Town regulatory boards and the process for moving forward:

In conversation with Jeremy Ginsberg, Director of Planning and Zoning, we learned the following:

- Essentially, in order to gain approval for installing the lights, a change to Section 405B of the Darien Zoning Regulations would be required. This particular section regulates outdoor lighting and the height limits established for light poles would need to be increased for the stadium field lights.
- A zoning change will require the Planning and Zoning Commission to conduct a public hearing on the request.
- If our request/application were submitted by September 15th, the public hearing would be conducted sometime in October. If we do not make the September 15th submission date, then we would have to meet an October 20th submission date in order for a public hearing to occur sometime in November. After the public hearing commences, the commission then has 35 days to close the hearing (unless the applicant agrees to extend the hearing). Once the hearing is closed, the commission then has 65 days to render a decision on the application.
- The Board of Education has scheduled a public information session on the subject of the proposed stadium lighting system. The meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, September 5, 2006. It will be held in the auditorium of Darien High School starting at 7:30 pm. This will be an open forum for the public to present information, express views, and ask questions regarding the proposal for a stadium lighting system.
- Until the public, and especially the neighbors, have an opportunity to present further information, views, and issues, the Administration is not prepared to put forward a recommendation to the Board. However, if the Board eventually were to decide to move forward with the proposal, there may need to be consideration of the implications if a legal challenge were made to such a decision.