

# Places to Play: Solving Snohomish County's Youth Sports Fields Shortage

A report and four-point plan to solve  
the problem, by 1000 Friends of Washington's  
Snohomish County program.

January 20, 2005

# More Sports Fields for Our Kids

## Building a Better Future for Snohomish County

### **Snohomish County needs more ballfields**

It's an undisputed fact: For years, Snohomish County has needed more sports fields on which our kids can play. This need has become ever more apparent in light of recent action taken by Snohomish County to evict by May 2005 the North and South Snohomish Little Leagues from 17 fields the leagues built in desperation and without permits on protected agricultural land near Snohomish.

Some two dozen Little Leagues across the County share the frustration of the leagues caught up in the Snohomish controversy. Leagues from Monroe, Snohomish, Lake Stevens, Marysville and Arlington all have said publicly they need more fields to provide for their kids' needs. Numbers provided by the South Snohomish Little League show that the problem will get far worse if Snohomish County does not get serious about their role in planning for and providing adequate recreational facilities.

South Snohomish Little League estimates that about 15 fields are now available to them, including six fields at the Snohomish site from which they may be barred next spring, two County Parks Department fields and seven public school fields. At present the league has 720 players on 60 teams. The League estimates it will have 950 players by 2010, with the need for six new fields; 1200 players by 2015, needing another six fields; and 1450 players by 2020, needing an additional eight fields. The total need for just this one league in the next 20 years will be 20 new fields.

This set of facts points to the urgency of a problem that calls out for leadership from the County, yet the County Council has approached the problem with a nearly complete absence of leadership.

The problem becomes clear upon review of the history of the issue: The Snohomish County Council has seriously neglected its legally-mandated obligation to plan for and to help provide recreational facilities that are adequate in both quality and quantity for the youth of our communities.

### **A Failure to Plan and Provide**

The County Parks Department has known as far back as 1994 that there was a huge need for baseball and soccer fields in our County, as documented in their 1994 Snohomish County Comprehensive Park Plan. This need was further documented in the County's 2001 Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan. Despite this knowledge, the County's comprehensive plan determined that the County should only provide ballfields as part of

Community Parks, where acreage would be used for other purposes as well. Outside of that meager action, the county has adopted no policy nor has it initiated any planning that would help bridge that gap between the supply of and demand for sports fields for our communities.

The current County Council has acknowledged the huge need for sports fields and has expressed awareness of the Little Leagues plight; some members have even said publicly that they knew of the illegal Snohomish fields. But rather than working at the local level for solutions, the Council paid lip service to the issue while continuously avoiding policies and actions that would help to solve the problem. The Council has ignored requests to:

- Dedicate land in the Cathcart Landfill area for future sports fields;
- Adopt Planning Commission recommendations to modify impact fee schedules to allow areas with field shortages to raise needed money from new development;
- Allocate more Real Estate Excise Tax money for sports fields;
- Consider issuing bonds specifically for recreational field acquisition and development.
- Grandfather in the existing fields through the annual comprehensive plan update in a legal fashion.

At the same time, the Council cut \$500,000 for fields needed in the densely urban area of North Marysville (during the Capital Facility Plan process of the 2005 budget hearings), returning \$150,000 to the General Fund and shifting \$350,000 to construction of two new fields in the sparsely populated rural town of Darrington.

The only action the Council has taken on the policy front is to, once again, try to circumvent state law to allow recreational facilities – including sports fields and golf courses—on designated agricultural land.

For the Council, this is a return to an old and reliably unsuccessful favorite state-level policy scheme: change the Growth Management Act to allow “temporary” sports fields on protected farmland.

Bills attempting such a maneuver have been defeated in the Legislature for six years in a row. With both the House and the Senate currently controlled by lawmakers who favor farmland protection, the County’s lone policy proposal appears even less viable than in previous years.

Meanwhile, as the participation forecasts from the South Snohomish County Little League demonstrate vividly, the problem on our local fields will worsen.

## **The Solution – A Four-point Plan for More Sports Fields**

**1. Plan for Kids and Fields.** Temporary uses on designated agricultural land will not solve this problem. Our kids deserve permanent places to play baseball and soccer that are close to their homes. They deserve as many permanent fields as are required to ensure they will have places to play year in and year out. These well maintained, drained, lighted fields need to be in areas closer to where our kids live and go to school so they do not have to be driven all over the County to play sports. Walking and riding bicycles to games and practices make for a healthier experience.

**2. Use surplus and undeveloped public land for fields.** Currently, the County owns 14 Community Parks that already provide or will soon provide 14 soccer fields and 17 baseball fields for the entire county. These community parks can accommodate eight more soccer fields and nine more baseball fields, if relatively modest development funding is identified.

Additionally, other potentially viable sites should be evaluated for sports field use:

**Schools.** While all fields on school land are being utilized by little leagues for games and practices, additional land exists and may be suitable for field development. The Arlington School District has 180 acres of surplus land and Lynnwood schools have surplus land they hope to sell. It is likely other school districts have land available that could be utilized if funding were available. The County should compile a list of those lands, develop plans and, if appropriate, seek voter approval for local funding.

**Cathcart Landfill Site** – Some 50 County-owned acres at the the Cathcart Landfill site is immediately available for sports field development. The County Council has already sold between 50 and 65 acres to the Snohomish School District and another 40 acres has been developed into the Willis Tucker Park. Fifty acres for fields would complement these uses nicely. Such a plan would help ease the field shortage and would leave ample reserves for the County to sell off, as outlined in the County Comprehensive plan, for residential and commercial development.

**North Marysville** -- Before NASCAR's dalliance with this area for a racetrack, the County was in negotiations with the City of Marysville for development of 28 baseball and seven soccer fields in this area. Now that NASCAR is no longer considering this site, the County should move forward with these plans. New funding will need to be found because, as stated above, the Council reallocated the \$500,000 for fields in this area to the City of Darrington and to the General Fund for other uses

**Pelz Property** – There are about 80 acres on the Tulalip reservation that could be used for sports fields.

**Department of Natural Resource sites** -- More than 2,000 acres are available. It is unclear exactly how many of these acres would be suitable, but it is clear that 127 acres in the Lake Stevens area are known to be suitable. Additionally, 13.5 acres at

Harbor Point in Mukilteo, located between SR 525 and Harbor Point Boulevard, is available and is zoned appropriately for a sports complex.

**Wellington Hills**—Currently a golf course on 121 acres, this site off Snohomish-Woodinville Road at SR 9 is proposed in the updated County comprehensive plan as an urban industrial zone. The County Council should consider a portion of this land for recreational facility development.

**Private land** – In lieu of park mitigation fees, developers can build ball fields as part of large development projects.

### **3. Fund acquisition and development of fields with public-private partnerships and other funding sources.**

Funding for new land and for development and maintenance of fields can be found if the County Council is serious about solving the problem. There are several policy and funding mechanisms at the local and state level that we recommend for the acquisition and development of sports fields.

County Parks and Recreation needs for capital acquisition and development have been addressed traditionally through three funding areas: real estate excise taxes (REET); park impact-mitigation fees; and various local, state and federal sources.

**REET**--County Parks competes for the REET funding in the County's annual budget process, and we recommend the Parks Department redouble its efforts in presenting the case for more athletic facilities; it is well within the County Council's ability to increase acquisition and development funding through this existing process.

**Mitigation Fees**--The County Council should adopt a Planning Commission recommendation to revise the impact fee schedule to enable higher fees in areas where the need for fee-funded sports facilities are greatest. To date, the Council has refused to move on this new policy option.

**Other sources**—The County Council should aggressively explore a series of options that the Council majority has chosen to ignore to date:

- Park and Recreation Service Areas (PRSA) – These local improvement districts collect tax revenues to provide for specific park projects to benefit those within the taxing district. At present, there is an active effort to establish a PRSA in the Lake Stevens School District.
- Park and Recreation Districts – These are similar to PRSAs, in that they consist of a legally defined district created by a vote of the people. There are two PRDs, one that corresponds to the Monroe School District, and one that

corresponds to the Northshore School District. The County Council should encourage creation of new districts to address local needs.

- Public/Private Partnerships – There are several opportunities to encourage private sector investment in parks and recreation, such as the existing Friends of Everett Parks. Developers can also build ball fields in developments in lieu of mitigation fees. Finally, the Little Leagues themselves can help fund field development.

Beyond local avenues, the County Council should aggressively pursue available state funding to assist the Parks Department in developing existing ballfield land and for acquiring needed land for the future. The County has voiced its intent to pursue a change in growth management law to allow conversion of farmland for sports fields, instead, despite the fact that such legislation has failed six years running. Therefore, 1000 Friends of Washington will be recommending that the Legislature allocate money for sports field acquisition and development on behalf of Snohomish County.

**4. Provide a one-time exception to legalize current fields that are illegally sited** – Regardless of the fact that Snohomish County officials gave at least tacit endorsement of the siting of ballfields in violation of state law, it has now ordered the North Snohomish and South Snohomish Little Leagues (as well as some others immediately) off the fields by May, 2005, without a plan for where those teams will play next spring. Because the prospects for restoring the land to productive agriculture are very poor (giving the extensive grading and compacting), and because it's not the kids fault that the fields were built illegally, we recommend the Council give a one-time exception to make these fields legal.

This action would require changing the county's Future Land Use Map during the 10-year comprehensive plan update and de-designating these lands from agriculture to rural or urban use. In addition, the county will need to require permits from the Little Leagues, which in some cases will require a SEPA determination based on impacts to traffic and drainage.

Snohomish County does not need to change state law to legalize these fields on a one time basis. The leadership of the current County Council appears unwilling to pursue a comprehensive plan change to “grandfather in” the illegal fields. Such a step would make the unstated goal of this Council—attacking the Growth Management Act's protection of agricultural lands—unnecessary.

Because the County Council has refused to take this step, 1000 Friends of Washington is working in Olympia on legislation that would provide a one-time exemption for the fields near Snohomish, without opening scarce protected farmland for further conversion.

## **The Wrong Solution – Building Ballfields on Designated Farmland**

For years, this Council has lobbied to change the Growth Management Act to allow for “temporary” uses of fallow farmland for ballfield leagues. There are many reasons why the Growth Management Act prevents sports fields on designated farmland, common sense realities that underscore why the Legislature has declined for the last six years to weaken farmland protections to allow recreational development. Among the reasons:

1. Pesticides used on neighboring fields could harm children.
2. Playfield traffic and farm vehicles are not safely compatible.
3. Ballfields should be in neighborhoods where kids can ride their bikes or walk to games and practices, not on farmland outside town requires everyone to drive.
4. Less than 5 percent of Snohomish County remains protected farmland. We need to save it for farming, especially when alternatives to conversion exist.
5. Most of the designated agricultural land in Snohomish County is located in the 100 year flood plain of the Stillaguamish and Snohomish River basins. These lands are historically flooded, and tend to have drainage problems during traditional baseball and soccer seasons (spring and fall).
6. Once farmland has been graded, compacted, and built on, it’s not economically or ecologically viable to return it to farming.
7. Temporary fields are inferior. The fact that they must be temporary means no drainage or road improvements, no lighting for night play, no bathrooms, and no concessions stands.
8. A change in growth management law is wholly unnecessary because better alternatives to sports fields on farmland exist throughout Snohomish County.

### **The Hidden Agenda**

Why is the Snohomish County Council continuing to pursue a solution that every objective observer agrees cannot work?

A look at the record can lead to the reasonable conclusion that the Council is purposefully attempting to use the plight of ball-playing children to achieve a long-desired weakening of protections provided under the Growth Management Act.

This Council has pursued an agenda that, at best, is not helpful to the kids of the North and South Snohomish Little Leagues, who today are foundering without places to play this spring. Rather than take the straightforward step of amending the comprehensive plan to legalize the existing fields, the council has:

- Backed legislation this session to amend the state Growth Management Act to allow conversion of protected agricultural land for “temporary” sports fields, despite the fact that similar bills have failed for the past six years in Legislatures less supportive of the Act than the current one.
- Passed a comprehensive plan change that would open agricultural land to recreation conversion should the GMA ever be changes to allow them.

- Failed to act in Olympia to pursue available state funding for local sports field acquisition and development.
- Declined to develop land already owned by the County
- Continued to fight for comprehensive plan changes that would de-designate 110 acres of flood-prone farmland in the Island Crossing area north of Arlington to allow a car lot and other commercial businesses, despite repeated judicial setbacks.

It is clear this Council is not trying to build ball fields for our kids. They want to open up what little prime farmland we have left for private development.

We strongly recommend a solution, outlined in the four-point plan above, that is better for our children and the long-term health of our communities and our scarce agricultural lands.