

PUBLIC COMMENT SUBMITTED 12/10/24 – TOPIC IS LINCOLN FIELD

I implore you; do not sell the Lincoln field. It is a vital resource for the youth of this community. High school student athletes in many sports utilize that field on a regular basis. As adults, we are tasked with making decisions with the best interest of children at the center and deciding to sell this property to be developed is in direct conflict with that.

I write this letter as a mental health professional, an employee of the Ashland School District, and a parent of two students in Ashland schools. One of my daughters is in 11th grade at AHS and I can attest that the main reason she continues to attend this high school is the soccer program. There have been many challenging aspects of her high school experience that have prompted me to explore options outside of this district, but the soccer program has been an anchor for her and, therefore, she is still enrolled in the Ashland School District.

We know that a robust athletic program at the high school level is one of the most powerful protective factors for youth. In this time of alarming rates of substance use, mental health issues, and suicide amongst youth, I am extremely concerned that the impact of weakening the athletic programs at Ashland High School would be harmful to students. I believe it is our duty to do what we can to increase resilience and a sense of belonging amongst students. Athletic programs to this. Selling this property, taking away a vital resource for students, and building housing right next to the high school does not.

I realize that the district is in a dire financial situation and a factor in the budget deficit is decreasing enrollment. This type of blow to the athletic programs at AHS will most certainly negatively impact enrollment. Students who are part of teams and athletic communities want to stay at the high school. Younger students look up to the high school athletes and want to stay in district to be a part of the Grizz teams. Families who come together to support student athletes create community, and all of this creates a strong school district that attracts more students.

Selling this piece of property that is used by so many students for these very important activities would be a grave mistake. Please do what is best for students and let them use this land for activities that enhance their experience at the high school.

Sincerely,

Amber Langer

Jacqueline Schad

From: ASC Pres <ashlandsoccerclubpresident@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, December 12, 2024 7:39 AM
To: Jacqueline Schad
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Public Comment: Lincoln Field

This Message originated outside your organization.

The Ashland Soccer Club is a non-profit, volunteer-run organization and the largest youth sports club in Ashland. Currently, about 350 children aged 5 to 14 are registered in the club spread over 21 teams that play about seven months out of the year. Over 95% of those children reside in Ashland.

Over the last few years, the Ashland Soccer Club has experienced unprecedented growth. (In 2017, the club had 125 registered players). A big reason for that growth is our commitment to make the sport affordable and accessible. Kinders and first graders do not pay any fees, and the club has awarded more than \$12,000 in need-based scholarships over the last two years.

That growth is now being felt at the high school. The AHS boys program had three teams – a varsity and two JV teams – this past fall, and the girls program had a varsity team and 22 girls on its JV team. In total, there were 91 AHS students in the soccer program. Currently, the Ashland Soccer Club has 55 registered girls in the 6th/7th/8th grades alone. Given that, AHS will surely have a second JV girls' team as soon as next fall and into the future, meaning there will be six total high school soccer teams serving well over 100 kids. That means more than 1 out of every 10 students at the high school will be part of the soccer program.

I think we can all agree that this is great news. More kids are choosing to be active, to play a sport, and studies have shown that kids engaged in an activity like soccer are more likely to attend classes, stay in school and graduate. And at a time when some of the other sports at the high school are struggling with numbers, soccer is growing.

You can understand then why the Ashland soccer community responded strongly to the school board's efforts to sell Lincoln Field, which the high school teams and the Ashland Soccer Club teams use. The school district does not have another property like it – the middle school fields and the field near the old Lincoln Elementary School are dangerously unsuitable at present, and Lincoln Field is required for an important school purpose that more than 10% of AHS students participate in.

We respect that the school board, in pursuing an ambitious project in the hopes of creating affordable housing, is being inventive in its efforts to address the enrollment crisis facing the district. But we also believe it is minimizing the role that soccer, and team sports in general, can play in helping solve that crisis. One of the best players on the AHS girls' team this past fall, sophomore Kendal Yazzolina, moved into the district from Eagle Point because she wanted to be part of Ashland's growing girls' program. Sophomore Wynn Pistole elected to stay – after considering a transfer to South Medford High – after seeing the improvements AHS made to its coaching staff and the young players arriving into the program.

The back-and-forth over the future of Lincoln Field has at times been reduced to soccer versus affordable housing, to choosing sports over the district's efforts to boost enrollment and retain

students. However, it will take a multi-prong approach to retain and draw new students to the district, and thriving sports programs should play a central role in that effort.

The greatest challenge in managing the growth of the Ashland Soccer Club has been finding field space for our many teams. There is only one full soccer field (North Mountain Park #1) on land managed by Ashland Parks & Recreation. That field is also used by the ultimate Frisbee club, lacrosse club and the Ashland Adult Soccer League. The Ashland Soccer Club squeezes its 21 teams on that field and in the space between the softball and baseball fields at North Mountain Park. This fall, 34 first-grade boys practiced each week on the small patch of grass at Briscoe. Even getting creative, we are unable to meet the club's needs using only Ashland Parks & Rec land. So we rent space from the high school – the turf stadium field and Lincoln Field – and we spend about \$4,000 per year renting space at Lithia & Driveway Fields in Medford, shipping some of our kids there for practice.

There has, to date, not been a specific response offered by the school board about where six high school soccer teams (and a football) team will practice and play games in the fall if Lincoln Field goes away. If any part of the answer involves North Mountain Park #1, the Ashland Soccer Club's current field crisis would become catastrophic. Simply put: If high school teams move onto North Mountain Park #1, the Ashland Soccer Club would have to cut the number of teams it hosts in the fall, perhaps by half, eliminating that opportunity for approximately 175 kids. Some of those kids will stop playing soccer entirely. Many of those families, or at least the ones who can afford it, will choose to enroll in clubs outside of Ashland, likely the Rogue Valley Timbers in Medford. This is how you lose families, by taking away the services they want and forcing them to look outside Ashland to find them.

The Ashland Soccer Club is not against finding a way to build more affordable housing in Ashland. But it is our view that the decision to use Lincoln Field in that pursuit overlooked the impact losing that field would have on athletics at the high school and on the community overall and will worsen the problem that the project is attempting to address. It is our hope is that alternate sites will be reviewed again with those considerations appropriately weighted.

Sincerely,

The Ashland Soccer Club board of directors

George Dohrmann
Scott Fitch
Susie Lutz
Nathan Van de Graaff
Troy Hammell
Adrian Horvath
Marika Donovan
Christopher Dietl
Brittany Hardy