

School Board Seeks Solution to Summit High Sink Holes

by K_Guice

Once a place for gym classes, after-school practice and a haven for students enjoying the outdoors; the Summit High School athletic field now looks more like a battle ground.

Riddled with huge sink holes after a massive storm last December, there has been an ongoing debate about how and when the problem will be fixed.

The school board wants to pour \$150,000 worth of temporary fixes into the school grounds while they decide upon a final fix and funding. Some school faculty and students do not want to see the school district bandage the problem; they just want to see a permanent solution, once and for all.

To fully understand the problem you have to go back six years to when the school and the 18-acre athletic field was being built, atop an old pumice mine.

That mine belonged to the late Bill Miller of Central Oregon Pumice, who began mining the fields in the 1940s.

Fast forward to 1998; Miller made a generous donation to the school district. He offered 15 acres of land in West Bend for a new elementary school. From there he sold nearly 500 acres around the school to West Bend Properties.

Later, it was West Bend Properties that sat down with the school district to negotiate a site and a price for a high school to be built on the west side. The location selected is now the home of Summit High School; 30 acres of solid ground in the midst of Miller's old pumice mines. An additional 18 acres purchased was right over an old mine believed to be suitable to hold the athletic field.

A local engineering firm came in, confirmed the land was not suitable for buildings and suggested some pricey fixes for the field. However, the district's funds were running low.

According to John Rexford, district assistant superintendent and director of operations, the proposed one to two million dollar options would have meant taking money away from the actual high school structure.

Instead, the school board opted to fix problems as they came up annually. “Based on the information at the time it seemed like a good decision,” Rexford said.

Today, taking that calculated risk appears to have proven to be a pricey decision. “I supported the decision that was made at the time based on the information that they had,” said Carolyn Platt, vice chair of the Bend-La Pine school board. “We would not have been able to build the high school to the specification that we did if we had spent more to do something different with the field.”

Based on new information from the current engineering reports from Kleinfelder Inc., the initial million-dollar-plus solution proposed would not have been an acceptable long-term solution. “The fix that was suggested at that time was to go down several inches to back fill,” Platt said. However, the problem goes much deeper and will require a much more extensive solution.

“So, the fix that people said we should have done at another million or two dollars would not have stopped what happened. That is why we are being so thorough now,” she added.

Platt says the school board is committed to doing what it takes to get the field fixed, this time for good.

Rexford agrees, “The board seemed to have a consensus towards doing the full fix which included renovating the entire 18 acres.” He says that would be done in two phases.

The district will use insurance reimbursements and reserves to make short-term repairs so that the fields will be available when school begins in the fall. As the \$150,000 in repairs brings the fields to the condition they were in prior to the massive weather event last December 2005, the school district will refine a long-term option.

The school district is looking at two possible restoration methods - deep dynamic compaction or excavation and compaction -- which could stabilize the site. Estimated cost for the restoration? Rexford says they are looking at \$6 million or less.

Board members want more information about scheduling the project, how it would impact Summit students and a refined estimate that looks at ways to further lower costs before it decides on which permanent option to choose. In addition, the district has to decide how they will pay for the project.

Rexford said, the district has several surplus properties that could be sold. For example, there is a parcel near Shevlin Park currently in escrow. That sale would give the district \$8 million that could be used for the repairs.

Board members will take up the discussion once they have additional information. In the meantime, district maintenance crews will fill in the settlement areas that represent less than 10 percent of the site.

“The short solution is there with the thought to get young people on that field as soon as possible,” said Bill Smith, Bend-La Pine school board member. “But I think there is some confusion. The short-term solution doesn’t mean we aren’t committed to a long-term solution.”

When you do a short-term solution, Smith said, there are fears by some that the problem is going to be set aside.

That is a concern for Dave Turnbull, head track and field coach and teacher at Summit High School. "We are not in support of the temporary fix," he said.

Turnbull, who spoke to Smith after the school board met on June 13, believes the school board has good intentions, but doesn't agree with the current plan. "We are in support of our school district and our board, but not to throwing a \$150,000 into a hole."

It is important to understand that to Turnbull and his students this is not just an athletic field. "It affects p.e. (physical education), practice, it's part of our school," he said, "it's part of our classroom."

Turnbull says the sinkholes have been an ongoing problem over the years, from little six- to eight-inch holes to the massive ones that have left the field unusable. However, while sports has had to shuffle around, from finding other places to practice to playing games at other location, the coach says they don't want the fast fix for fall sports.

"They don't need to spend \$150,000," Turnbull said. As long as they know a date when construction is going to start, he says he is confident that the staff and students can cope. "We can make due with what we've got," he said. "We are willing to do that to save the tax payers money."

Many Summit High students feel the same way. Turnbull said he arrived at school the morning after the school board meeting to find kids waiting to talk to him. "They asked, "Can we get a petition going around and get it to the school board?" "They are good kids," Turnbull said.

Platt says it is the children of the community that really matter and they are dedicated to coming up with the best possible solution. "We don't want to make hasty decisions on things with long-term complications," she said.

"We are very committed to doing the right thing," Platt said. "Just bear with us as we come to understand and ask questions that we need to have answered to choose the right option and the right funding."

“I know and I believe in my heart they want wants best for kids. Their intentions are wonderful,” Turnbull said. “I just want a guarantee is going to be right.”

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