

Should there be a permanent fence around the Wilson softball field?

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

After extensive outreach two years ago, Hillsdale Neighborhood Association leader Don Baack was confident he had community support to turn the "Hillsdale Triangle" into a community plaza, regardless of what Portland Public Schools, owner of the property, thought of the idea.

Now, it seems, one part of the community has signaled that the buy-in is less than total.

The property in question lies between Rieke School and Wilson High School, and contains the high school's softball field. Softball players, coaches and parents have complained for years about the poor condition of the field. According

to girls softball parent Thomas Benke, the uneven ground is a potential source of injuries.

The team and parents helped refurbish the field through volunteer labor, and raised money to buy a fence for the field, thus allowing for it to be properly cared for. "In addition to its practical necessity, the new fence has symbolic importance," Benke wrote. "It creates a sense of place and permanence for the Wilson softball program."

In April Portland Public School staff started building the fence. Alarmed, Baack and other Hillsdale leaders appealed to Portland School Board member Ruth Atkins, and through her influenced facilities and assets management division director Bryan Winchester to issue a "stop work" order for the fence. Benke responded with a flyer headlined,

"Save the Rieke Ballfield and Wilson H.S. Softball!" and suggesting that the plaza would have "all the same elements as Pioneer Courthouse Square."

Hillsdale suggested a "temporary fence" that could accommodate the teams' immediate activities while not precluding their own long-term plans.

Winchester responded that such a fence would "cost several thousand dollars more" than the planned fence, and would involve "incalculable moving, storage and maintenance costs." He said that the fence would contain two gates that would allow access to the land.

Mike Roach, co-owner of Paloma Clothing and president of the Hillsdale Business and Professional Association said he didn't have a problem with the fence as much as with the way it was installed. "Clearly these girls needed a place to play varsity softball," he told *The Post*. "Ideally there would have been some notice to the neighborhood first. The way it was done was not in the spirit of cooperation."

"In the end the district made an important decision to leave a gate open so that other, future uses are not absolutely precluded. Most of our ideas for that space are just ideas at this point. No one knows when things are going to happen, and to deny these girls a chance to play now would not be fair."

Baack declared himself satisfied with the outcome. "It will do for now," he told *The Post*. The issue might have to be reopened someday if long-term plans for the triangle bear fruit, he said.

Such plans are predicated on a long-standing school district policy to allow

"shared use" of its facilities with the larger population when they do not conflict with school use. Benke says he is in favor of "multiple-use" of the land, but it quickly becomes clear that to him this means baseball or softball. He is opposed to "inconsistent uses," and for him that category includes both the summer concerts that Hillsdale is trying to attract and the Farmer's Market they would like to move there.

"If it's multi-use, no one will maintain it," he said. "If you balance the interests between the student interests and the larger community interests, there will be a continuing deterioration of the student facilities."

Even more central, Benke rejected the notion that because the land is "public property," it should be available for public benefit. "Our ideology is that this is private property that is for the benefit of the students here," said Benke, who stipulated that he did not officially represent others.

Told of Benke's comments, Roach replied, "That's a pre-Measure Five argument. That this is private property may be technically accurate, but he's missing the point. The district is trying to partner with others, to share facilities with the larger public that doesn't have children but does vote."




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