

Hampstead opts for synthetic grass, despite controversy elsewhere

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Despite an uproar in Westmount among residents who are adamantly opposed to synthetic grass being installed on their city's playing fields, officials with the Town of Hampstead say they have no regrets after artificial turf was recently installed in a children's playground.

Fieldturf Tarkett, a company that has been meeting the growing demand for synthetic turf in municipal parks and other public installations, installed artificial turf, specifically designed to absorb falls of up to 12 feet, under playground equipment in Hampstead Park.

The product was donated to the Town by John Gilman, CEO of the \$250 million sports surfacing company, who is a Hampstead resident. Although synthetic turf was not approved until last year for use beneath playground equipment, the company says it spent two years researching and developing a product that best answers the playground market's needs.

Hampstead mayor William Steinberg said the Town decided to opt for synthetic turf after weighing all the safety issues. "If a child falls off the top step of one of the slides, they'll be much less likely to be injured than if they fell onto either sand or grass," he said.

"It's also much cleaner than the sand. It's usable immediately after the last of the snow is gone, because the water drains away much faster than with grass. It looks nice. We've been told by grandparents who bring their grandkids to play in the playground that they don't have to worry about their shoes and pants getting dirty in the sand."

In Westmount, a coalition of residents and parents of children attending local daycare and school facilities remain opposed to synthetic turf being used on nearby sports fields. "There is incontrovertible evidence that the rubber in these fields contain toxins and probable carcinogens," they said in a deposition submitted recently.

Synthetic turf's well-known heat-absorbing effect "constitutes a significant health risk, especially for our youngest players," they added. The coalition believes that the impact of synthetic turf's rubber odour "has been grossly understated especially close to so many private dwellings."

Steinberg said Hampstead officials took these issues into account before arriving at a decision. "The rubber is loose only at the very beginning," he said, referring to the shredded tire material that is used as a filler. "It's not dangerous in any way unless somebody consumes a huge quantity ... We have doctors who have advised us, and overall they feel it's far safer than the alternative."

Avrom Shtern, a Côte St. Luc resident who has an active environmentalist with Montreal's Green Coalition for many years, said. "there is no definitive proof about artificial turf's bad effects on human health, but there's a big but here ...

"Most urban parks are already artificial," he added. "Do we really have to make them more so? ... We've isolated ourselves so much from the natural surroundings ... The smell of grass, fresh air, trees certainly enhance and promotes physical as well as well as spiritual fitness and well-being."