

Angela Lazzari

From: Liza Viana
Sent: Wednesday, January 15, 2025 1:17 PM
To: Juskiewicz, Anthony; Dr. Kim Feltre; Gale Bradford
Cc: Debra Varnerin; [REDACTED]; Bill Faxon; Angie Devanney; Angela Lazzari
Subject: BOE Field Maintenance Letter
Attachments: BOE Letter 1-15-25.pdf

Good afternoon Dr. Feltre,

I hope you are settling in nicely here in Berkeley Heights. I'm sorry I couldn't make the meeting you had with Mayor Angie Devanney a few weeks ago; I hope to meet you soon!

I'm sorry this is our first formal communication, but please find the attached letter from Mayor Angie Devanney and the Recreation Commission.

If the Board of Ed does not agree to a renewed lease agreement with the Township for the Lower Columbia field area by January 31, 2025, the Township/Recreation Commission will turn over all maintenance responsibilities to the BOE for all fields currently being taken care of by our staff, beginning February 1.

We sincerely hope a resolution to this unfortunate impasse can be found quickly, as these added responsibilities will cost the BOE over \$36,000 more per year in day-to-day/yearly maintenance/upkeep, plus the additional costs of infrastructure and other improvements that, to date, the Township and Recreation Commission have either paid for, or received grant funding for.

Please advise as to the BOE's plans on this very important matter.

Thank you.

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ANGIE D. DEVANNEY
MAYOR

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Dr. Kim Feltre

Superintendent, Berkeley Heights Public Schools

January 14, 2025

Dear Dr. Feltre,

We hope you had a wonderful holiday season and welcome to the Berkeley Heights family!

First and foremost, we love Berkeley Heights and want the very best for everyone. It is for that reason that we are writing to let you know that if the Township/Recreation Commission does not have a signed lease agreement for the area known as Lower Columbia by January 31, 2025 the Board of Education (BoE) must assume maintenance of all school properties currently maintained by the Township staff. We are disappointed it has come to this, but we have been more than patient waiting for a formal agreement.

Below is a timeline of events leading to this:

- Our first meeting with the Board of Education was over 18 months ago – July 17, 2023 - when Debra Varnerin of the Berkeley Heights Recreation Commission presented the lease agreement to the BoE Finance Committee.
- September 19, 2023 - the Rec Commission asked the Township to request a formal lease agreement with the BoE.
- February 2024 - a draft lease agreement was sent to the BoE attorney, and we believe it was discussed with the Board in private during a March 2024 meeting. After multiple requests for a status update in June, the BoE requested that Ms. Varnerin present to the Board Athletics Committee.
- June 11, 2024 - the Athletics Committee chair, Jordan Hyman, sent a list of questions various BOE members had regarding the agreement.
- June 12, 2024 - all the questions were answered via email, a copy of which is attached herein. A few more questions came up from Mr. Hyman and they too were immediately answered.
- June 20, 2024 - Ms. Varnerin presented to the Athletics Committee with Mayor Devanney in attendance. During the presentation we advised the BoE members that on

June 11, 2024, the Recreation Commission formally asked the Mayor to have the Township attorney draft a question to be added to the 2024 ballot to gauge public support for the Township to formally take over the field via lease agreement. During this same time, several more attempts were made to obtain a status update, and it was requested for Ms. Varnerin to present publicly to the BoE. It was suggested by the BoE attorney that a joint meeting with the Mayor, Town Council and BoE take place, where Ms. Varnerin can present, and all questions can be asked and responded to. That request was rejected by the BoE and we were advised the board would like to see the results of the ballot question.

- After the November 2024 election - We are excited to say that 83.04% of residents support the BoE entering into a lease agreement with the Township. I'm sure you know that the turnout in the 2024 election was the highest it has been in decades.

The coaches, former Athletic Director, current Athletic Director, and overwhelming majority of residents in our town support the lease agreement. It is disheartening that the Board is ignoring the wants and needs of their staff and residents. If the Township does not have a signed lease agreement by January 31, 2025, the Board of Education will need to assume the responsibilities listed below -- all of which are now being performed by 2.5 full-time Township employees:

- 1) Grass cutting of area known as Lower Columbia
- 2) Edging of Lower Columbia
- 3) Garbage removal at Lower Columbia
- 4) Infield maintenance of Floyd Taylor field
 - a. Daily grooming and lining
- 5) Infield maintenance of Upper Columbia/Annie Young field
 - a. Daily grooming and lining
- 6) Infield maintenance of Mary Kay McMillin field
 - a. Daily grooming and lining
- 7) Infield maintenance of Thomas P Hughes field
 - a. Daily grooming and lining
- 8) Infield maintenance of Mountain Park field
 - a. Daily grooming and lining
- 9) Infield maintenance of William Woodruff field
 - a. Daily grooming and lining
- 10) Monitoring of fields on weekends and notifying sports team of availability
- 11) Scheduling of 9 fields
- 12) Maintenance and monitoring of upper playground at Lower Columbia

Below is a list of the additional expenses associated with the tasks above:

- 1) Labor to cover the tasks listed above, estimated at 100 hours per week
- 2) \$8,000 per year for infield mix, bases, and base plugs
- 3) \$12,000 per year to replace the wood carpet in the upper playground
- 4) \$2,500 per year for additional maintenance and gas for extra grass mowing and edging
- 5) \$1,000 Maintenance of trees (trimming for safety)

- 6) \$6,480 per year for port-a-john rentals for William Woodruff, Mountain Park, Thomas P Hughes, Mary Kay McMillin for the months of March through November
- 7) \$6,400 per year for TruGreen services for Lower Columbia and Upper Columbia areas

Up until now, the Berkeley Heights Recreation Commission has charged field usage fees for the local sports team to utilize the fields. The fees go to offset Township costs associated with tasks/expenses listed above. For reference, in 2024, the monies received from PAL were \$8,625 which, as you can see, barely covers the cost of the infield mix.

If a signed lease agreement is not received by January 31, 2025, the BoE and Township will no longer have a partnership on maintaining the fields. Please remember that the BoE only owns one and a half tennis courts in this area, the Township owns the rest. As a result, an alternate location(s) will need to be found for school tennis practices and meets. Of course, you can use the one court the BoE owns but we will no longer restrict any other play on the remaining courts. The school practices and meets currently utilize all 5 courts and the wall ball during the spring and fall tennis seasons.

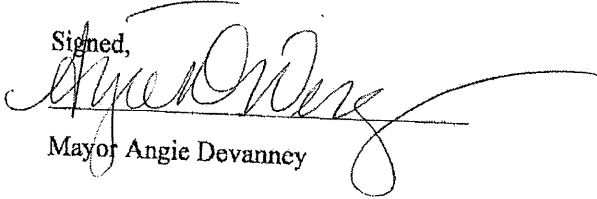
For over 50 years, the Township and Board of Education have worked collaboratively to maintain and improve our fields for the benefit of all Berkeley Heights residents. The Recreation Commission has donated tens of thousands of dollars to various Governor Livingston sports programs and has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in the facilities, always giving the school teams priority use. Below is a list of a few improvements we've made in the last 3 to 5 years – some of which has been done with grant funding that would not be available to the Board of Education:

- 1) Refurbished Upper Columbia/Annie Young softball field using state of the art material to aid in water drainage (\$15,000)
- 2) Installed drainage along 3rd base line at Upper Columbia/Annie Young softball field (\$3,000)
- 3) Installed drainage in upper playground at Lower Columbia Park (\$10,000)
- 4) Repaired vandalism at upper playground at Lower Columbia Park (\$8,000)
- 5) Resurfaced lower tennis courts (\$45,000)
- 6) Resurfaced upper tennis courts (\$45,000)
- 7) Replaced lights at lower tennis courts (\$110,000)
- 8) Installed walking path from Plainfield Avenue down Hamilton Avenue (\$45,000)
- 9) Fixed collapsed drainage pipe in soccer field at Lower Columbia (\$2,000)
- 10) Fixed drainage pipe in outfield of Floyd Taylor baseball field (\$1,000)
- 11) Installed larger drainage pipe in walking area next to upper playground at Lower Columbia Park to prevent water buildup and dangerous situation for walkers and students (\$10,000)
- 12) Installed security cameras in Lower Columbia Park to prevent constant vandalism (\$19,000)
- 13) Installed sitting area and bench between upper and lower tennis courts to correct swamp like area and create sitting area for tennis teams and students (\$5,000)

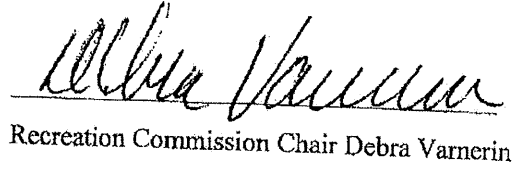
- 14) Installed rock/rain garden, bollards, and boulders between upper and lower tennis courts to correct swamp like area and prevent tennis teams from driving down walking path (\$7,000)
- 15) Paved walking path down Hamilton Ave (\$9,000)
- 16) Relocated walking path from in the wetlands behind Floyd Taylor baseball field (\$5,000)
- 17) Installed wildflower garden and bee sanctuary in area of old walking path (\$3,000)
- 18) Removed Hedrick softball field after severe damage from Hurricane Ida (\$5,000)
- 19) Refurbished Mountain Park field and converted to softball field (\$15,000)

We look forward to hearing from you and are hopeful we can come to an agreement to continue our partnership.

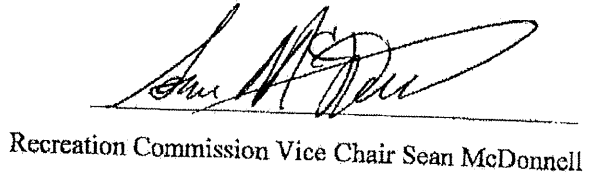
Signed,



Mayor Angie Devanney



Recreation Commission Chair Debra Varnerin



Recreation Commission Vice Chair Sean McDonnell