



THE COMING SQUEEZE ON HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC SPACE

As always, the California legislature has been busy, and with new laws going into effect, school districts need to be ready. This PlaceViews looks at some imminent changes that will affect schools both directly and indirectly and provides some strategies to address them.

SENATE BILL 328

First up is Senate Bill (SB) 328, approved by Governor Newsom in October 2019. SB 328 requires high schools to begin the school day no earlier than 8:30 am.¹ SB 328 applies to the majority of public and charter high schools,² beginning with the upcoming 2022-23 school year (July 1). The bill addresses the negative effect of sleep deprivation on student academic performance but will reduce the number of daylight hours available for after-school athletic activities during winter months. Not all athletic facilities can accommodate the shifting hours, but districts and schools need to ensure they can maintain their athletic programs, which have historically been a big draw for students and funding.

The athletic facilities and programs at public schools aren't easily found elsewhere. During the pandemic, public schools throughout the state lost students to home schooling, private schools, and other options. If many students continue these alternative educational paths instead of returning to public school, schools will have a harder time serving the students they do have because they are funded by the state according to student attendance. Athletic programs and facilities can help attract students back to campus and thus help school districts compete successfully for students.

IMPORTANCE OF ATHLETIC FACILITIES

It is well documented that participation in sports helps develop an array of personal skills, including resilience, leadership, teamwork, self-control, time management, accountability, and responsibility. "Physical activity has become even more important for students who did not get much exercise during the COVID-19 shutdown," says Dr. George J. McKenna III of the Los Angeles Unified School District's Board of Education. "Athletics motivates some of our students to come to school and keep their grades up so they can participate. Competitive sports teaches life lessons like teamwork, rewards for hard work, learning not to repeat the same mistake, and winning isn't everything."³

SENATE BILL 791

Increasing the quantity of dwelling units produced and improving the affordability of housing is proving to be a huge challenge in built-out communities. The State has enacted several laws to encourage additional housing production, especially affordable housing (e.g., Senate Bills 9 and 10). Another new law that could impact school districts is SB 791, which creates the California Surplus Land Unit to push public agencies, including school districts, who sell their surplus properties to sell them for housing. The unit's primary purpose is to facilitate the development of housing, and it offers some attractive services to help both seller agencies and buyer developers—facilitating agreements between developers and agencies; providing advice and technical assistance; and helping to obtain grants, loans, tax credits, credit enhancements, and other types of financing.⁴

This may help address the state's housing crisis, but it could exacerbate existing shortages of open space and athletic facilities. School districts that sell their properties for housing may not have enough land to meet the additional demand for recreational and athletic facilities that will follow the increase

in population. This squeeze on athletic and recreational space is expected to add to the impacts communities already feel from the state's efforts to streamline the approval of infill housing development.

OTHER STATE MEASURES

In October 2021, the Department of Housing and Community Development announced the leader of its Housing Accountability Unit, a recently created enforcement unit to ensure that local jurisdictions fulfill their legal responsibilities to plan, zone, and permit their share of the state's housing needs. Two weeks later in early November, California Attorney General Rob Bonta announced the creation of a "Housing Strike Force" to advance housing access, affordability, and equity in California. The strike force is tasked with enforcing housing laws, tenant rights, mortgage servicing, and consumer protection laws. Though these actions do not apply directly to school districts, the push for housing will increase local populations and the demand for athletic facilities and recreational space—and this *will* impact school districts. On a positive note, school districts can expect to see an increase in development impact fees associated with this increased housing.



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HOUSING VS. OPEN SPACE/ ATHLETIC FACILITIES

Food and shelter are the most basic needs of human life, but they are not the only needs. People also need outdoor spaces to relax, play, and exercise. Nevertheless, the shortage of land in urban areas has bred competition between housing and open/athletic space. One school district proposed to create a long-term funding source by leasing a large, district-owned site for residential or mixed-use development. The district would move the site’s ballfields and play courts to the adjacent high school. The high school would benefit from a new stadium, new basketball and tennis courts, and new baseball field and softball field. The lease arrangement would make an underutilized property more productive, provide funds for district projects, and give the community much-needed housing.

The drawback is the permanent loss of recreational/open space. Though the displaced facilities will be replaced on the high school campus, the school cannot expand them in the future, and the district cannot use the site if it ever needs a new school. In addition, it prevents the city or county from ever using one of the few remaining open space parcels for park and recreation space. California desperately needs additional housing, but the trade-off shouldn’t have to be lost open space and the lost opportunity for more parkland.

TWO PARTIAL SOLUTIONS

If a community is built out, it may be impossible or too expensive to add parkland and athletic facilities. In such a situation, the ways to increase access may be limited to:

- » Extending the useful hours of the day by adding lights to existing facilities.
- » Developing joint-use agreements to use existing school and park facilities more efficiently.

SPORTS FACILITY LIGHTING

Districts that need to squeeze in more activities on limited high school facilities, especially during winter months due to SB 328, can sometimes add lights to grass fields and basketball and tennis courts.

Unfortunately, SB 328 did not earmark any funding to support its impacts to facilities. At the date of this publication, one of the two statewide school bond bills working their way through the legislature includes \$500 million earmarked for “stadium lights” (SB 22, Glazer; the Public Preschool, K–12, and College Health and Safety Bond Act of 2022). However, much of the impact of SB 328 is not to stadiums but to other fields and courts, such as tennis courts and soccer fields. If the language of SB 22 could be broadened to include more types of affected facilities, it would better benefit school districts.

Adding sports lighting and its attendant evening activities are “projects” under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and require some level of environmental

Figure 1: Light spillover from softball field lighting.

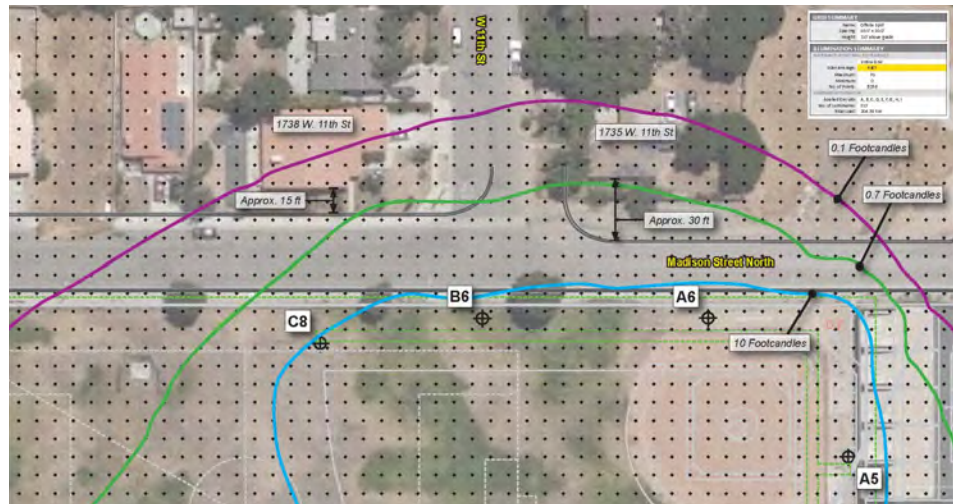
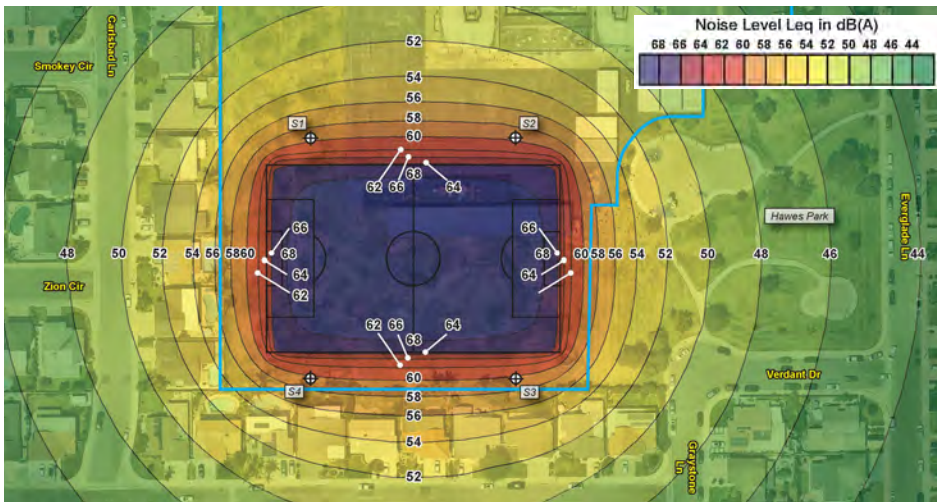


Figure 2: Visual simulation of field lighting.



Figure 3: Noise contours for community soccer field at an existing school.



review. If lighted facilities are proposed in the interior of a campus, the impacts are more likely to be negligible, and a CEQA exemption may be all that is needed. But schools are usually near homes, and adding lights and evening activities to a campus can cause light, glare, noise, and traffic that affect the whole neighborhood. When lights are proposed next to homes, the project may require a (mitigated) negative declaration or even an environmental impact report. These CEQA processes can easily take four to six months or longer.

When considering a lighting project, districts should identify a strong design team—an architect, lighting engineer, and environmental consultant—to develop a plan that is sensitive to the concerns of neighbors. Where needed, appropriate mitigation measures should be identified. Figures 1 and 2 (see previous page) show how light spillover can be quantified along nearby residences and how nighttime glare impacts can be demonstrated visually using computer modeling. Figure 3 shows the projected noise contours for youth soccer practices at an existing school. PlaceWorks worked with a developer and school district to identify the location for a relocated, lighted soccer field with the least impact on the surrounding residences.

JOINT-USE OPPORTUNITIES

With limited opportunities to create new open space and athletic facilities, school districts and municipalities can use joint-use agreements to co-locate schools and parkland, making the most of a limited resource. However, school districts and municipalities often find it difficult to negotiate agreements. Their differing perspectives and agendas put them at odds on issues like access times, reimbursement for maintenance and use, and liability and insurance. Though barriers like these can impede agencies from successfully negotiating an agreement, many

communities have made it work, and the land use constraints in urban areas require that we fully explore this option.

JOINT-USE SUCCESS STORY

The City of Tustin and Tustin USD were awarded a Proposition 68 grant to create a joint-use park on a 3.5-acre turf field at the back of Heideman Elementary School. The surrounding area is seriously deficient in park and recreational space, and the community is fully urbanized, so finding land to convert to recreational space was virtually impossible. The park master plan in Figure 4 shows a lighted soccer field, lighted basketball courts, skate pod, and many other amenities. The students gain access to enhanced amenities during the school day, and the community gains a park after school and on weekends.

CONCLUSION

Once developed, open space is nearly impossible to reestablish. As urban communities become denser, we need to redouble efforts to ensure that the need for housing does not squeeze out the need for school athletic space and open space and that our communities have enough space for people to enjoy their lives.

Figure 4: Proposed joint-use park at an existing school.





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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

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Endnotes

1. The American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics have both formally recommended that middle and high schools start no earlier than 8:30 am.
See American Medical Association, "AMA Supports Delayed School Start Times to Improve Adolescent Wellness," AMA press release, June 14, 2016, <https://www.ama-assn.org/press-center/press-releases/ama-supports-delayed-school-start-times-improve-adolescent-wellness>; American Academy of Pediatrics, "School Start Times for Adolescents," policy statement, September 1, 2014, <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/134/3/642/74175/School-Start-Times-for-Adolescents>.
2. Rural schools and rural charter schools are excluded.
3. Los Angeles Unified School District, "Board Approves Improvement and Development of Athletic Facilities," press release, June 22, 2021, <https://achieve.lausd.net/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&DoMainID=4&ModuleInstanceID=4466&ViewID=6446EE88-D30C-497E-9316-3F8874B3E108&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=107625&PageID=1>.
4. California Health and Safety Code, sec. 54910.