

Dear Mayor Kirschner,

I am writing in response to your letter regarding the Sarasota County School District's decision to include on-campus baseball and softball fields in the plans for the rebuild of Booker High School. The district very much appreciates the collaboration of the city of Sarasota in our effort to ensure that the new BHS campus serves both the students and the community well, including the alignment of Orange Avenue, the participation of area residents in the economic benefits of the project and minimizing any adverse impacts on the surrounding neighborhoods.

Although we are very much vested in that collaboration, our first responsibility is to deliver optimum service to our students at minimum cost to taxpayers. Nevertheless, locating the ball fields on the BHS campus affects the city's recreational programs, so I feel you are entitled to an explanation for our decision.

The BHS site is relatively small by modern standards for high school campuses. As we considered our space requirements for the new buildings to be included in the BHS rebuild, it initially appeared as if the site would be too small to accommodate those needs and two ball fields. At that point, we began to consider alternatives.

Two options that seemed promising were to have students play baseball at Ed Smith Stadium and softball on fields to be built at the R.L. Taylor Community Complex. From the district's point of view, those options may have been workable, but were never ideal.

Whenever possible it is much more convenient for students, coaches and staff to have sports facilities on their school campus. Playing home games on campus saves travel costs; alleviates competing scheduling interests; keeps all gate, concession and advertising revenue at the school; keeps our ball players close to their locker rooms; encourages participation and reduces use and clean-up fees. In addition, it is cost-effective to build athletic fields where support facilities such as the press box, concession stand and restrooms can be shared rather than being duplicated at more than one site.

Regarding softball, having girls play and practice off campus and boys play and practice on campus creates a gender equity issue. We have contacted the Office of Civil Rights about how to address the issue, but we remain concerned. As a result, we believe it is best to have both boys and girls on campus wherever possible.

A more pressing issue has developed regarding the requirements of the Florida High School Athletic Association regarding the capital improvements and maintenance required to support an FHSAA-sanctioned competitive softball program. The initial discussion of locating the ball fields off campus involved the school district making most of the capital investments and the city accepting responsibility for maintaining the fields.

Given the current park agreement between the city of Sarasota and Sarasota County, responsibility for maintenance of the fields at competitive condition has not been clearly established. Our original discussions involved the School Board making some initial

capital investments in the field at the R.L. Taylor Community Complex and the City maintaining those fields to a competitive FHSAA standard. Those conditions are not in place today.

While it would be exciting to see the BHS boys play baseball at Ed Smith Stadium, their season, with practices, games and post-season schedule, requires that they have access to a competitive field on a daily basis from late January to mid-May. The district's agreement regarding Ed Smith Stadium doesn't support that level of access, which means we would need to provide a baseball practice field at BHS in any case.

Taking all of the issues above into account, we have determined that including both a baseball and softball field on the campus of the new Booker High School is in the best interests of our students. While I understand that the city would prefer that we locate those fields off campus, I hope you can appreciate that once we determined that the space was available to accommodate both fields on campus, the advantages of doing so were so compelling that we really had no other choice but to do so.

I want to thank you, the City Commission, and city staff for your support of the Booker High School rebuild project and for your continued willingness to partner with the School Board. I believe our collaborative efforts to ensure employment opportunities for residents on our construction projects, to provide a convenient branch location for the Sarasota County Technical Institute (for the next two years or so) at Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd. and Osprey Avenue are outstanding examples of government agencies cooperating for the benefit of their constituents.

I look forward to continuing to pursue whatever opportunities arise out of the Booker High School rebuild and future initiatives for the City Commission and the School Board to collaborate on behalf of the community.

Sincerely,

Shirley Brown, Chair
School Board of Sarasota County