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Resident says fields next to Route 2 may be unsafe The Boston Globe

Officials discount fears that pollution might harm athletes



Brooke de Lench, at Concord's new fields next to Route 2, warns about the fields' health risks. (Joanne Rathe/Globe Staff)

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CONCORD - Hundreds of students will play on the new state-of-the-art athletic fields under construction in Concord - which is exactly what worries resident Brooke de Lench.

The \$3.8 million artificial-turf playing fields are about 100 feet from Route 2, one of the town's busiest roadways.

"Why would anyone put the kids that close to Route 2?" said de Lench, author of the 2006 book "Home Team Advantage: the Critical Role of Mothers in Youth Sports."

Standing between the highway and the playing fields on a recent morning, de Lench looked at the traffic and said: "It's very, very frightening how close it is."

While lush, suburban Concord may not spring to mind as a community with big air-pollution worries, de Lench fears the air pollution caused by car exhaust will affect students' asthma and respiratory illness rates. She wants the town to test the air quality there before the official opening on June 8.

That concern is shared by state Representative Denise Provost, a Somerville Democrat who introduced a bill this year banning developers from constructing playing fields - as well as housing, schools, day-care centers, and other buildings - within 500 feet of a highway traveled by more than 50,000 cars a day.

Under her proposal, such construction could take place only with a special permit or after an air-quality study.

"Massachusetts does not do a good job monitoring particulate," Provost said in a phone interview. "But the risk is clear."

Somerville, home to busy Interstate 93 and Route 28, has a higher rate of deaths from lung and cardiovascular problems than it should for its population and size, Provost said.

Her bill was sent to a study committee, where it effectively died, but she said she intends to refile it next year.

Concord Town Manager Christopher Whelan said the idea of testing the air quality at the fields has been discussed by the Board of Selectmen, but not seriously considered.

"There have been playing fields on this site for years, and this has never been brought up" as a legitimate health concern, he said.

Even if the town tested the fields, he said, there are no state standards regulating particulate levels.