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## Southside: School shuts down sports fields

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The news of the field's closing Tuesday night came as a shock to assistant varsity coach Gary Sansiveri, who also teaches social studies at Southside.

"Well, we have practice tomorrow morning at 9 a.m. (at McNaught Field)," Sansiveri said Tuesday night. The district expects it will take at least 24 hours to notify all players and coaches about the field closings.

State law requires all varsity athletes to have attended a certain number of practices before playing in their first game.

The Southside football team has not yet had enough practices to play in its opening game in Binghamton on Friday, Sansiveri said. The junior varsity was scheduled to play at Southside.

John Lesky, the district's athletics director, could not be reached for comment Tuesday night.

Lesky has been considering alternate playing fields and revising the schedule since last Thursday, just in case the school board decided to close the fields, said Robert Gosden, the district's associate superintendent.

Cathy Hammond of Elmira, who attended the board meeting, was against the board's decision to close down the fields.

"What about the people who support sports and feel the fields are safe?" Hammond asked. "I agree. We need further testing but to shut down those fields — you just told those kids that it's not a safe place."

A few others said the board's decision conflicted with the state's declaration that the school and the playing fields are safe for students.

"I was comfortable with the state's report," said Tim Decker, a math teacher and varsity baseball coach at Southside. "I'm leery to go back now. Now it's going to raise concerns. If the fields aren't safe, is the school safe?"

Decker said he supported the board's decision and would like to see someone address the safety inside the school once more.

Representatives from the state Department of Health and Department of Environmental Conservation have reported that the air and water inside the school were free from contaminants and did not pose a health risk.

Thomas Kump, director of environmental health for Chemung County, said Tuesday night that he had not heard the board's discussion before its decision, but he said he was familiar with the state's recommendation to the district. Kump resigned from his position as school board president on Monday, citing concerns about a perceived conflict of interest.

"The state made no recommendations in their report to restrict the use of the playing fields," Kump said.

The state did recommend that the school implement a soil plan that would lower the risk of contaminants buried beneath the soil reaching the surface. In response, the school district has temporarily banned all digging on the school

property and is developing a more thorough soil management plan, Superintendent Laura Sherwood said.

"We have no reason to believe that the fields are not safe," Kump said. "The state, to put the people's mind at ease, offered to do additional testing of the fields. I don't think we have any reason to believe they'll find anything too different from what they've already found there."

Andy Patros of Elmira disagreed with Hammond.

"Yes, it's (sports) important, but as a parent of a cancer victim who played sports, I think you're making the right decision," Patros told the board.

Kump said, "People are still looking at this emotionally." "It appears the school board is reacting to the emotions of the community."

Sherwood also outlined in her report to the board plans to make sure students and parents know at the start of this school year that hazing or the threat of violence will not be tolerated.

The school district, in accordance with state law, is prohibiting the practice of hazing in school buildings, school property and also at any activities sponsored by the school district on or off school grounds, Sherwood said. The school district will give out the student code of conduct at the beginning of the school year, Sherwood said. Students will also review the policy at student assemblies and at parent open houses.

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