

Editorials

Weighing safety

■ Board wisely reopened McNaught Field, but other school fields will be a tougher call.

The Elmira school board's vote last week to reopen McNaught Field reversed what appeared to be an unwarranted closure in August. However, the more significant decision will come in early 2001, after the school district reviews soils tests ordered as part of an investigation into cancer cases among Southside High School students.

The board's 8-0 vote last week came less than four months after board members voted 7-2 to close McNaught, a practice field abutting Maple Avenue that is used by Southside sports teams. McNaught was closed, along with fields on Southside High School property, while the state conducted further soil tests to determine whether industrial pollutants in the ground were endangering those who used the fields.

There was scant evidence at the time to justify the McNaught closing, but board members decided to be cautious. As a result, they displaced athletic teams and coaches, forcing them to move fall practices to other areas. Two environmental consultants who subsequently studied McNaught found no reason to conduct further soil studies. To its credit, the Southside Advisory Committee recommended the field be reopened, and the board followed the committee's advice.

Aside from the inconvenience to athletes and residents who used McNaught, the board action added to the public perception that pollution on the Southside could be widespread. The board acted responsibly by changing its mind long before the spring sports season so teams can plan accordingly. But in the future, it's important that board members carefully weigh scientific, and not just anecdotal, evidence before making such a major decision.

The continued closure of fields on Southside High School property makes more sense, since that is the area under prime suspicion in this matter. Environmental reviews on that property are due in February. If they come back positive, the board has validated its initial instinct that the grounds could be dangerous. But if the results are negative, the board must quickly reopen the fields and begin restoring confidence in the safety of the grounds.

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