

# Sydney councils in turf war over natural or plastic fields

By [Angus Thompson](#) | December 1, 2021 | Sydney Morning Herald

The risk of saying goodbye to less than \$1 million helped sway a Sydney council to allow a synthetic sports field on a flood basin close to an endangered forest and national park.

Despite initially refusing to replace natural grass with plastic at the sensitive site, Ku-ring-gai Council officers later wrote in a report that some \$929,000 from state government and community grants intended specifically for a synthetic field “cannot easily be overlooked”.

Cited in the report before the October 2020 council meeting was the conditional support of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). But while the environmental authority was supportive of the upgrade, it was concerned about synthetics.

In a September letter it had asked for a detailed analysis of the environmental, social and health impacts, among others. It said there was a danger of chemicals flowing into nearby Quarry Creek, urban heat concerns for the native flora and fauna - including the vulnerable powerful owl - and potential risk to the critically endangered Sydney Turpentine Ironbark Forest.

Resident Mignon Booth said, from an environmental perspective, the plan was “highly risky”.

“To put it near a waterway, to put it near endangered flora without knowing exactly what you’re doing, it couldn’t be in a worse spot,” Ms Booth said, adding there were unknown factors about the use of synthetic turf due to a dearth of thorough research.

Planning Minister Rob Stokes hopes an investigation by the state’s chief scientist will address the unknowns, with similar concerns raised in an October report commissioned by the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE).

A Ku-ring-gai Council spokeswoman said NPWS’s concerns were being worked through, and the council would refer to the government report in pushing

forward with the \$3.3 million project, as well as installing a pollutant trap and filtering basin to ensure against run-off into the environment.

The spokeswoman also said the use of cork infill in the surface would be a better option environmentally than rubber.

Despite the assurances, candidates are pitching battle over synthetic turf, not only in Ku-ring-gai, but in councils across Sydney in the lead-up to Saturday's local government elections. Communities are divided over the environmental effects versus the increased participation in sport they say the artificial turf will allow.

In nearby Lane Cove, microplastics have been leaking from an artificial pitch at Blackman Park, a reserve on the Lane Cove River. A critical component of the environmental assessment for the proposed synthetic field at Bob Campbell Oval in Greenwich was also discovered to be missing in July, prompting the appraisal to be scrapped.

That divisive project has been one of the motivating factors in resident Merri Southwood running for Lane Cove Council.

"This is the only level, open space in our area, and in an environmentally sensitive location, and it will become a single-purpose sports field that will dominate the use of the reserve and impact the flexibility that the space now offers," she said.

Gardiner Park in Banksia has become a battleground where Bayside Council has fended off sustained protests over the laying of a synthetic field, a conflict from which candidates have sprung. Greens members Greta Werner and Catriona Carver are campaigning against artificial turf.

A key argument of councils and sporting clubs for synthetic is its ability to cope with greater wear, with the October government report quoting figures for natural turf as being able to bear about 25 hours a week.

However, it also noted turf scientists Mick Battam and Paul Lamble challenged those assumptions, demonstrating there were some that could handle up to 65 hours a week.

But synthetic turf consultant Martin Sheppard, whose business Smart Connection is heavily involved in promoting the industry, said that level of usage was aspirational.

“You can’t get 60 hours of usage on any field anywhere in Australia. I’d rather have a [natural] turf field every single day, but the problem is the population is growing, we’re trying to get more people active ... that means there’s not enough fields to go around,” he said.

Smart Connection is a prolific player, advising councils on their ground strategies, creating guides with major sporting bodies, and whose material was a significant contributor to the DPIE report.

The report highlighted the lack of community consultation required to install synthetic fields, as no development application is required, combined with a propensity for the projects to be funded via government and sporting grants.

It also revealed there was a community perception that well-organised lobbying from the synthetic turf industry and sporting bodies led to a disproportionate priority over natural turf, an arena some council candidates are pushing to upset.