

Track and Field Renovation - Well Past Overdue

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October 7th, Oakland, ME ... Fans from communities across Maine converge this fall around their school's local athletic complexes to rally and cheer with pride for their favorite teams and share in the age old tradition of Friday night lights sports. What is unusual about those coming together to cheer at the Oakland fields at Messalonskee High School is that the field looks very much the same as it did when some of those spectators, who are now the parents or grandparents of the current students, were the students themselves.



**Left: Competitors at start of long distance race at Messalonskee, from two decades ago. Right: Aerial view of same dirt oval track with field in middle today.*

Fred Perkins, a Belgrade resident and Messalonskee graduate from 1989, couldn't help but compare his early experiences as he watched the October 7th football game between Messalonskee and Brewer. "Sometimes when we walk down on this facility it feels as if time stood still, at least based upon the field conditions."

While many changes have been implemented for academic improvements and to bring modern tools to RSU 18, the district's lack of change to their fields over the decades have led to the poor conditions today which have become a source of embarrassment for many in the community.

Amy Bernatchez, a Messalonskee alum said *"I believe I was on one of the last track teams to host a home meet at Messalonskee.....and that was well over 25 years ago."*

According to Tommy Hill, the Athletic Director, *"Our cross country and track programs have had to resort to training on pavement or inside a gym. Valuable practice time is taken up by traveling to area high schools or colleges to use actual track facilities. A lot of time this travel is done in private vehicles, which excludes some athletes who might not have the means or permission to travel this way."* Bernatchez give credit to the programs saying *"The Messalonskee Track and Field program has had amazing success of the years. This is a tribute*

to the commitment of the hard-working athletes and the committed coaches who have found a way to train with no facility."

While the need for renovations first came up with plans drawn in the 90's, they didn't move forward. In 2000, the National Guard helped the school out with the field conditions and since then grounds and maintenance staff have done the best they could with the resources they were allocated during the annual budget process.

This past year the Messalonskee Middle and High School All Sports Boosters has proposed \$3.9 million in renovations with a goal to bring their main field complex up to the same standards as many other schools across the state and in to the current modern era. Lisa Burton, President of All Sports Boosters shared *"We are the only Class A school in Maine that lacks a track facility. There are no permanent restroom facilities by the field and we lack storage facilities for equipment. This multi-purpose turf field with a track would achieve the safety and accessibility standards needed while serve many athletic programs at the school, as well as the community as a whole."*

An eight lane track is planned as part of the renovation to replace the dirt oval that is there now and would surround a multi-purpose turf field for supporting a number of sports. Proponents for this renovation project feel it just isn't acceptable anymore for kids to practice on these facilities, nor is it safe. Jon Moody, resident, parent, former teacher and principal in RSU18 said *"It has caused countless injuries, prevented athletes from finishing seasons, hasn't encouraged local community use or the expansion of local events."* Moody goes on to say *"The current field conditions are even an issue for the physical education program at the schools, rarely dry or safe enough to allow regular use by students and teachers."*

Athletic Director Tommy Hill sees broader use as well, saying *"Our community and youth programs will benefit by increased access to a new facility. The ability to maximize usage throughout the day and added monthly access over the course of the year will benefit everyone."*

The RSU18 School Board has placed the Athletic complex renovation among other safety and accessibility upgrades on a single bond that is now on the November 7 referendum, combining it with other facility upgrades needed across the RSU18 district for communities to vote.

Michael Guarino, a taxpayer in both Belgrade and Sidney communities within RSU18, said that *"The state of the athletic facilities is really unacceptable. We have two children active in sports and moved away to another community in Maine for a couple of years. So we've seen many athletic facilities across the state of Maine. When we moved back home to Messalonskee, it really struck us how behind our school is in this regard, and has been for a very long time. Much smaller communities in far more rural areas have been able to build paved tracks and renovate their fields. In those places it has created a tremendous sense of pride and camaraderie in the community. Why wouldn't we invest in this legacy for future generations in the same way here at Messalonskee?"*

Amy Bernatchez, whose children all have graduated from Messalonskee said, *“I look forward to the new track. Not only will it serve the current and future student body of RSU #18, but I believe everyone in the community will benefit from having a safe place to walk and run.”*

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For renovation project summary and design details, as well as the estimated costs per town, visit <https://allsportsboosters.com/athletic-complex>