



Verona Baseball Softball League

660 Bloomfield Ave; VBSL Lockbox

Verona, NJ 07044



Dear Verona Council Members,

I hope that you all had a nice Thanksgiving, and I wish you a joyous holiday season. The Fair in the Square was quite successful this year! It's these types of events that truly show the unique aspects of living in a special town like Verona. Thanks to all of you for your continued dedication to our town.

My name is Lisa Loudon, and I am the current president of the VBSL. I have been involved in the VBSL for approximately 19 years, since my oldest was in 1st grade. I have six kids, all of whom played in both the VBSL and have been involved in many other sports organizations in town. I have a great deal of respect for each of these organizations and what they add to our small but vibrant town of Verona.

I am writing to you to stress how important it is for the council to come to a resolution on Everett field. The renovation of this field has been postponed numerous times, and the field has not been maintained properly for many years. It is not only a focal point as you enter the town of Verona, but it is an integral part of the VBSL, a volunteer organization that runs both a recreation and travel baseball and softball program for the town.

In the spring of 2023, the VBSL had 511 girls and boys in the recreation league. In addition to those 48 recreation teams, we supported another 13 travel teams as well. This was in the spring season alone. In summer, we had a 1st and 2nd grade program, along with another 13 summer travel teams. This past fall, we were able to give 9 teams an opportunity to play softball and baseball. If you tallied up all the players on these teams, it is approximately 931 players. It is important to note that some of those players play on multiple teams during those seasons, but we can safely say that we give over 500 different kids the opportunity to be on a field.

I would venture to guess that the only other program that offers this number of kids (GIRLS AND BOYS ALL LIVING IN VERONA) this opportunity would be the recreation and travel basketball program, organized and supported by the Verona Recreation Department (a paid division of the town). I think this program is awesome, and Dave Rowbotham does a spectacular job of running it. However, I believe the basketball court at the VCC has been well maintained and the high school courts that they use have all been redone in the past few years. The gyms in the elementary schools are in good shape because of the fact that all of the schools use those courts in their school activities as well. If you took even one of those courts away, I can't imagine how difficult that would make running this vast program. Or if you told Dave every other week that he would need to cancel games because of the court conditions, it would be quite the challenge. Can you even imagine the number of complaints you would receive if those courts weren't in the pristine condition they are in? Or the number of games that might need to be rescheduled? I think that would be a hard task to add onto an already difficult job. It would be even harder if you were a volunteer running the program, with a family and a full-time job as well. I imagine you understand this better than anyone, since you all dedicate a significant portion of your free time to Verona as well.

As stated above, I commend all of the sports programs in town for their efforts, but over the years all of those programs have been supported by the new turf fields in town. Centennial, Liberty, and Freedom are all fields that can be used by football, soccer, and lacrosse. Liberty is the only turf field that can be used by baseball and softball, but it unfortunately has limitations for many of our teams. Liberty field is not set up properly to support many of our ages, including our older 60/90 baseball teams (second base ends up being midway into the outfield) or our softball teams (there is no proper pitching rubber located at Liberty for softball pitchers). In addition, developmentally, Liberty is not a good place to teach our younger players the game due to many aspects, including the large backstop. I won't bore you with the details but would be more than happy to discuss. Liberty was not designed for baseball and softball. I am not saying it should have been. It was designed to be a multipurpose field and baseball and softball are able to play there as needed. We are thankful for that. Freedom was designed to be a football, soccer, and lacrosse field. Centennial was designed for soccer and football (I understand it has limitations with some of the older football teams due to the close distance to the walls). Everett was designed to be a baseball and softball field. Unfortunately, Everett does not have the advantages of being well maintained like these other fields.

In the past two months, I have been asked by many people if VBSL is willing to help with the renovation of Everett Field. I can safely give you a resounding yes to that. We will support this project in any way needed. Historically, we have provided support financially, through sponsors, and by providing some of the physical labor to improve Everett itself.

When I first joined the VBSL board, Rich Williamson was the president. No one did more for the VBSL than Rich did. Not only did he financially support the fields in town, but he physically did a lot of labor himself, providing much of the needed maintenance at Everett. He supported DPW better than I ever could when I took over. This period coincided with both Liberty being built in 2015 and later Freedom the following year.

In 2015, the year Liberty Field was opened, the VBSL built and paid for the cement stands at Everett field. At that time, there was approximately \$200,000 in the budget that was allocated to Everett for field renovations. The VBSL's goal was to support the field renovation with the new stands. In addition to the stands, between 2015-2017, the VBSL put all new appliances in the snack bar, including a refrigerator, a freezer, and a new stove. The \$200,000 in the budget was never used towards Everett field. There were no renovations done, and there have been no significant renovations done since that time. A year later Freedom field was built, another turf field which is used for football and soccer. I am unaware where the \$200,000 was allocated.

Again, I stress that over the next few years, only routine maintenance was done to Everett field. During Rich Williamson's time at the VBSL and up until 2020, the VBSL paid approximately \$6000 a year to Green Valley Landscaping to support cleanup beyond what we as a board and the DPW could do. That included removal of rubbish, poison ivy, and cleanup around the shed. (The shed that is at Everett was also paid for by VBSL.) In addition, the VBSL has a bathroom and has paid for a handicap accessible port-o-john at Everett field for almost a decade. Did you know that the VBSL places and pays approximately \$5,000 a year for port-o-johns at Brookdale, FN Brown, Forest and Everett field? For a few years, Verona United contributed to those costs, however, they don't need to use those fields a significant amount, so understandably they don't need the port-o-johns as much. They have been supportive of the VBSL in past efforts, and we always appreciate that. The organizations that use Liberty, Centennial

and Freedom, do not need to be concerned about bathroom usage by players. They have access to town-maintained bathrooms.

In 2020, when COVID hit, the VBSL's spring season ended before it started. Along with the rest of the world, we all had to take a break to reflect on what was important to us. During this time, the children were greatly affected by this pause in society. At an age where technology had already impacted their lives, they were swept into a world where everything revolved around it. The social activities, like sports, were taken away. That season, I was president of the VBSL. I can tell you that the VBSL spent many hours on virtual meetings trying to determine how we could change this. We were the first organization to put kids back on the field. This took countless hours of work, but in the end was well worth the effort. We were able to put 12 teams on the field in the summer of 2020. It was a trying time, and we received a lot of support from the DPW. This was not an easy task since there had been no maintenance during COVID. The grass on Everett covered the infield, but we did have access to Liberty so that helped. In addition, we received support from the Police Department and Mr. Aloia, the town lawyer, in making sure we protected both ourselves and the town during this unprecedented period. I also want to note that during that summer, I personally along with three other high school students, painted the front of the snack bar, painted the bathroom, cleaned, sanitized, and put in new toilet piping for the bathroom. We wanted to make sure that nothing stopped us from providing kids a safe place to play.

The summer came and went, and we paved the road for other sports organizations to get back on the field. It was fantastic to see everyone back out there, but selfishly for the VBSL, it took away Liberty for us. We don't generally get a lot of access to Liberty in the fall (which I do not disagree with since this is not our primary season). I fully support that this should be primary for football, soccer, and field hockey during the fall season. It just limited us since Everett had taken a real beating during COVID. That is our primary and only field that we rely on in the fall. Once it starts to get dark early, you cannot play on any of the other grass fields. In addition, there is little maintenance done on these in the fall. Unfortunately, early in the season, one of the parents complained about the condition of the field to the town. They were concerned about injuries. The town's response was to shut down our access to it for the remainder of the season. We were allowed to practice in the outfield, but no infield use and no games. Our season was essentially over. The only bright light to it in my mind would be that if the town was going to go this far and shut down the field, they would certainly discuss Everett field renovations with us. At that time, I emailed the town manager Matt Cavallo six times to try and sit down and talk to him. I got no response regarding what happened. Spring came, and the best the town could offer was to have DPW drag the field and add an additional two feet of infield to try and get rid of the lip in the outfield. That's it; that is all that was done. Three years have passed, and nothing has been done. Eight years have passed since the \$200,000 was set aside in the budget for Everett (and not used). Eight years have passed since Liberty was built. Seven years have passed since Freedom was built. Countless years have passed since any significant work (not done by the VBSL) was done to Everett Field.

Meanwhile, during the time period discussed, the town has approved multiple housing developments including the Annin Lofts and the ninety-six units going up across from the VCC. We have done a major renovation to an already beautiful town pool. There are funds set aside to repair Centennial field, and there is a new park being built by the VCC. Yet, somehow, we can't come to an agreement that Everett Field needs to be renovated. Somehow, we continue to find ways to delay this.

My kids are nearly grown and will never get the benefit of a renovated field, but as someone who has lived, worked, and raised a family in Verona, I would love nothing more than to see Everett Field be taken care of the way the family that left it to this town hoped it would be. I would love nothing more than to see the next generation of the VBSL board not to have to worry about whether they will be able to support the kids who sign up for recreation each year. I would love to drive into Verona and visually see how much the town cares about its fields and parks. I would love nothing more than to see children playing on that field every night, even after a rainstorm. As the current president of the VBSL, I would love nothing more than to see that you support our organization as much as we have and continue to support this town over the years.

Thank you,

Lisa Loudon

President, Verona Baseball Softball League

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