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BCI's Field: Before (above) and after (below) the field was dug up due to an underground gas leak.



Excavation began in the summer of 2024. As of March 2025, construction continues with no specified end date.

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Executive Summary

Brantford Collegiate Institute (BCI) is the largest high school in Brantford, Ontario, with 1,500 students and a reputation for athletic excellence, reflected by its successful athletic programs. However, BCI's outdoor field and track are unsafe and unused due to poor conditions, highlighting a major gap in the school's other modern and well-kept athletic facilities.

The Opportunity:

A gas leak from BCI's geothermal system led to excavation of the field and outdoor facilities, yet no upgrade plans have been shared. Given the school's athletic legacy, rising enrollment numbers, and underserved community, restoring the field with safer, modern facilities would benefit both students and the wider community.

Considerations:

- Parking is limited, making renovations challenging, as the field backs onto a main lot,
- Public school budgets are tight and provincially controlled, but schools can raise external funds for upgrades like sport fields,
- Students currently lack an outdoor space for leisure and social interactions and the surrounding community also lacks accessible free rec outdoor spaces.

Recommendations

1. Focus on raising funds through a holistic community-funded initiative.
2. Collaborate with the City of Brantford to move BCI's staff parking lot to a nearby public parking lot.
3. Prioritize a high-quality grass field and versatile sport/training equipment.

Final Suggestion:

Prioritizing a high-quality grass field and versatile sport/training equipment over a full track offers a practical balance between quality and quantity, offering greater flexibility in optimizing the outdoor area for both the school and the community. To ensure successful implementation, final steps must include securing funding, finalizing a design plan that is multifunctional and durable, and establishing promotional, operational, and risk/crisis management strategies.

Introduction

Details about Facility

Built in 1910, Brantford Collegiate Institute (BCI) (GEDSB, n.d.) is the largest secondary school in Brantford, Ontario, home to 1500 students from grades 9-12. The school offers a variety of specialized programs, including the Health and Fitness Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) program. The addition of the Health and Fitness SHSM reflects BCI's long-term athletic successes. The school's sports teams routinely win provincial championships, particularly in rugby. This athletic culture is further shaped by Brantford's identity as the hometown of Wayne Gretzky, contributing to its legacy of producing professional athletes. This mix of specialized programs and athletic achievements attracts the best student athletes from across the city and surrounding county (GEDSB, n.d.).

However, by just looking at BCI's field and outdoor sport facilities – you would never guess they were successful in sports. No sport team uses the field, and it is seldom used for Physical classes. The field itself is small, uneven, and filled with holes and bumps, posing some serious safety risks. A small, concrete track (220 meters) surrounds this field, but its odd circumference makes measurements difficult. Even worse, running for too long on concrete can cause painful problems in the legs and feet (such as shin splints). Because of this, sport teams and gym classes travel far to other schools or public parks to hold practices and classes. Over the years, BCI has undergone numerous renovations and upgrades to their facilities and programs but have always neglected the field and its surrounding space, leaving the outdoor facility in poor condition.

Values and Organizational Structure

As a public school, BCI operates under the regulations and principles of their broader school board: the Grand Erie District School Board (GEDSB). The school board values dignity, respect, growth, inclusivity, and creativity, aiming to imbed these values into everyday interactions, teaching, and school culture (GEDSB, n.d.). Additional to that, BCI places a strong emphasis on extracurricular excellence, viewing sports and activities as vital to the school's culture (GEDSB, n.d.). Individual schools, such as BCI, receive operational funding from the

Grand Erie District School Board (GEDSB), which distributes provincial funds based on student enrollment and specific school needs (Ontario, n.d.).

The Opportunity

Last summer, Brian Thompson from the Brantford Expositor (2024) wrote about a gas leak due to issues with BCI's geothermal system located beneath the field. Concurrently, Baker and Senora from CTV News Kitchener (2024) reported that the gas was hydrogen sulfide, which fortunately, had not reached dangerous concentration levels. However, to repair the geothermal system, the field had to be completely dug up. Currently, indoor school operations have been running as normal, but the school has restricted access to the field as construction/repairs continue (Baker & Senora, 2024). The only official statement from the school regarding the future of the field is it "will be replaced once the work is done" (Baker & Senora, 2024).

Although the gas leak is unfortunate, the dug-up field presents an opportunity to improve its outdated and unsafe outdoor sport facilities during reconstruction. Beyond enhancing BCI's athletic culture and improving program and class quality, upgrading the field rather than simply replacing it can help address community needs.

BCI is located in a lower-income neighbourhood, which lacks accessible and inclusive public recreation spaces. Therefore, improving the field can provide an opportunity for enhancing community recreation and collaboration, fostering accessibility to sports and fitness, and creating a more inclusive space for all. Brantford is also undergoing a rapid population growth, already prompting other necessary educational facility upgrades and additions around the city. Finally, One of BCI's major attraction features for prospective students is their Health and Fitness SHSM—yet students do not even have access to an adequate outdoor learning/training space, hindering the program's overall effectiveness.

Since I was a student at BCI, the field has been a topic of frustration among the school community. However, there has been no public discussion regarding the possibility of upgrading the outdoor facilities rather than merely replacing them. I reached out to BCI's principal, Michael DeGroote for further discussion on this topic. However, he was not aware of what was going on with the outdoor construction and redirected me to the GEDSB, who never answered

my emails. So, there is concern about transparency, planning, and stakeholder awareness regarding future plans for the field. Given BCI's strong athletic history, increasing student population, and neighbourhood needs, upgrading the field would be a significant investment in both the school and the encompassing community.

Considerations

BCI is located downtown, presenting challenges for renovations. Parking is already very limited, with only two small lots – one of them which backs onto the field. Therefore, expanding the field would require reducing parking space, presenting further logistical, social, and financial challenges/considerations.

Moreover, budgeting is an important priority in Ontario public schools, as all operational funding comes from the school boards (Canadian School Board Association, n.d.). Due to the increase in population seen in the city, the GEDSB has also seen an increase in enrollment by almost 1000 students within the last couple years (Grand Erie District School Board, 2024). Therefore, their budget has increased by an additional \$1.5 million, bringing the total from last year's \$23.5 million to \$25 million. The GEDSB (2024) has stated that this extra funding will go to core education, technology, and indigenous and French programs. However, public schools are allowed to raise their own money for extra expenses such as upgrading a field and outdoor facilities (Grand Erie District School Board, 2024). Therefore, given the high cost of upgrading sports fields (ranging from \$200,000 - \$5 million) (Safe Healthy Playing Fields, n.d.), and the GEDSB's prioritization strategy for funding allocation, BCI would likely need to seek alternative revenue, such as through school fundraisers, community partnerships, or external grants. Fortunately, in a sports-driven city, there is greater potential for local partnerships with sport clubs and recreation groups to generate consistent revenue, ensuring sustainable operations.

Finally, BCI lacks a large outdoor space, limiting student leisure to indoors. A usable outdoor area would encourage students to spend more time outside, stay active, and engage with nature, promoting overall well-being. The field would also serve the community, addressing the neighbourhood's lack of accessible and inclusive recreational facilities.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Focus on raising funds through a holistic community-funded initiative.

Since the GEDSB budget is tight—allocated primarily to core education, technology, and Indigenous and French programs, BCI should explore alternative funding and marketing sources to improve its field. This may include grant applications and government incentives, sponsorships and partnerships, and fundraising events and initiatives.

A strategic approach to applying for grants and government incentives is crucial for success in actually getting the funds. Therefore, positioning the project as a necessity due to community and school challenges alongside an increased demand for accessible public recreation spaces can strengthen the appeal for funding from the community, school board and provincial government. To get a grant, the initiative/project must demonstrate alignment with the specific goals, focus, and values of the particular grant. Accordingly, BCI should explore grants aiming to address youth engagement in sport, low-income community health and wellness, sport and recreation accessibility, and increasing diversity in leisure opportunities

Moreover, hosting school and community fundraisers can boost student and community engagement with the school, while bringing awareness, funds, and support for a new field. Concurrently, collaborating with local businesses and organizations can provide BCI tangible resources and expertise in exchange for free marketing, creating mutual benefits. This not only helps raise funds but also fosters meaningful connections, empathy, and shared knowledge. Organizations can gain brand recognition while contributing to a meaningful cause, highlighting a commitment to ESG. Additionally, community members can feel included in the process, reducing push back and accounting for unique needs and considerations.

Recommendation #2: Collaborate with the City of Brantford to move BCI's staff parking lot to a nearby public parking lot.

Since the field backs onto the school parking lot, expansion may require adaptations to the current parking system. However, completely eliminating the lot isn't feasible, as the only

other lot can accommodate only half the staff. Fortunately, there is a largely unused public parking lot within a 5-minute walk from the school. Moving the school parking lot to be joint with this public one could benefit both the city of Brantford and BCI. BCI would be able to expand the field onto where the parking lot currently sits, allowing for around another 1500 square meters of field to be made – doubling the size of the current field. In return, the city could charge the school a small fee for rent.

However, this recommendation requires significant considerations. First, to maintain accessibility regulations, all accessibility spots must be made in the other school parking lot located right next to the school. Second, BCI should ensure they effectively explain the new situation to school members, teachers, students, and the general public, to ensure everyone understands the new system. It would also require some small changes to the existing city parking lot such as signage and lighting, which would increase project costs. There may also be resistance from staff, as adverse weather conditions would make the new lot inconvenient. Additionally, the public lot is out of sight from the school, raising safety concerns given the area's high crime rate.

Overall, moving the parking lot would require financial risk-taking and the project would be prolonged, possibly angering neighbourhood residents, students, and staff. Regardless, a larger field would provide much-needed recreational and sport opportunities for the community while enhancing the school's high performing athletics programs.

Recommendation #3: Prioritize a high-quality grass field and versatile sport/training equipment.

BCI could opt for a straight, rubber track strip, a sandpit, and basketball hoops (for example) to maximize space, benefit multiple sports/activities/classes, and thus, engage more people. By reducing the track to just one straight strip with 2-3 lanes, the field can be expanded without touching the parking lot, and athletes get “the best of both worlds”.

This approach requires creative problem solving and out-of-the-box thinking. If the outdoor area where the field sits is essentially re-designed with a new layout, the school may be able to fit more, better-quality recreation and sport amenities while enabling a field expansion (although not as large as recommendation #2). It may seem counterproductive to get rid of the track, but the fixed space of the facility is not adequate for full training anyways. A regular size

track would not fit even if BCI were to get rid of the parking lot, so external training for BCI's track team will continue to always be necessary at times. A reduced track remains valuable, as it provides a dedicated surface for track athletes and other sport teams and Phys-ed classes to conduct drills and workouts without always needing to train elsewhere.

Recommended Course of Action

I encourage BCI to prioritize a high-quality grass field and versatile sport/training equipment over a full track while focusing on raising funds through a holistic community-funded initiative. Combining recommendation #1 and #3 fosters a more versatile, inclusive, and sustainable outdoor recreation space that serves a wider range of students and community members. By opting for a straight rubber track strip and other multifunctional outdoor sport amenities, BCI can maximize space, increasing the range of activities that can be trained/played and enable a quality upgrade the field without disrupting the parking lot. Further, this approach balances practicality with safety and longevity. High-quality field improvements ensure durability and safety for the users, minimizing injury and infrastructure risks and extending the facility's overall lifespan with reduced/manageable maintenance costs.

Action Plan

Short-term (0-12 months)

First, BCI should consult and collaborate with key stakeholders, focusing on gaining empathy, knowledge, and understanding from diverse perspectives. They must begin by gaining approval from the GEDSB and consult with the City of Brantford on regulations and permits needed while talking with external professionals needed for construction and design (e.g., EllisDon, architects, etc.). At the same time, BCI should be actively seeking and developing relationships with local organizations and community groups for potential partnerships, sponsorships, and grants. They should further engage the school and community through surveys and discussions with students, teachers, neighbors, and parents to identify their key needs. Findings will help BCI refine and solidify the facility's design for maximum benefit. Finally, they should be developing and launching a fundraising campaign to raise awareness and gain

both financial and community sport while developing a formal risk and crisis management plan to proactively identify and address problems before they get out of hand.

Long-term (1+ years)

First, securing long-term funding and partnerships is crucial. This involves establishing sponsorship agreements and applying for government grants to ensure financial viability and stability. Next, after a funding is secured, the priority should be to finish the construction using high quality and sustainable materials such as water-resistant turf. Concurrently, BCI should shift efforts toward expanding its program offerings for both the school and community, creating an organized program schedule to ensure maximum usage. Finally, during this time, it is essential that BCI establish a contingency fund and crisis management plan, creating resilience and providing financial protection in case of failure or emerging challenges.

Risk Management

This approach is highly complicated, requiring extensive strategic planning and expertise from landscape and building professionals to maximize the space effectively and viably. This would likely extend the construction timeline, considering the planning, legal, and procurement processes. At the same time, fundraising has its own risks. If the efforts aren't successful, the operation costs for the fundraisers may exceed the actual funds raised, resulting in financial losses. Additionally, BCI must consider the potential for community and stakeholder resistance. The school would remain a construction zone for a longer period, delaying the availability of the field for use and rental. While this represents a long-term investment, the costs could be significant, especially given that public schools typically lack financial reserves. The prolonged disruption could also impact the surrounding community, potentially leading to neighborhood concerns and pushback.

To mitigate this, BCI should analyze the community and school demographics to determine the most effective fundraising methods. The school should also remain transparent about money allocation to avoid concerns from funders and community members. Since grants rarely cover all costs of the project, BCI must diversify its fundraising efforts. Therefore, they should have a well-structured, concise, and realistic plan that is always ready to be presented to

potential funders. BCI must have a comprehensive understanding of the risks, challenges, opportunities, and benefits of the project. Ultimately, this strategic mix of external partnerships, grants, and fundraising can ease some of the financial and logistical challenges of improving BCI's field. However, careful planning is necessary to avoid negative risks and uncertainties while maximizing support.

Therefore, to prevent future issues and ensure longevity of the new facility, BCI must establish and actively implement proactive risk and crisis management strategies. To do so, they should:

- Conduct ongoing maintenance and safety checks to ensure the field remains in safe and excellent condition.
- Actively communicate with and develop relationships with key stakeholders and partners to secure and ensure long-term funding and support.
- Allocate a specific job role to a relevant staff member (such as a Phys-ed teacher who knows sports/recreation well) to oversee the outdoor facility management, ensuring proper maintenance, scheduling, and safety.

Conclusion

Prioritizing a high-quality grass field and versatile sport/training equipment over a full track offers a practical balance between quality and quantity, offering greater flexibility in optimizing the outdoor area for both the school and the community. To ensure successful implementation, final steps must include securing funding, finalizing a design plan that is multifunctional and durable, and establishing promotional, operational, and risk/crisis management strategies. Overall, this approach focuses on durability, safety, and quality while accommodating multiple activities and sports, therefore reaching a wider population and ensuring long-term sustainability of infrastructure

Appendix

Figure 1

BCI field before excavation

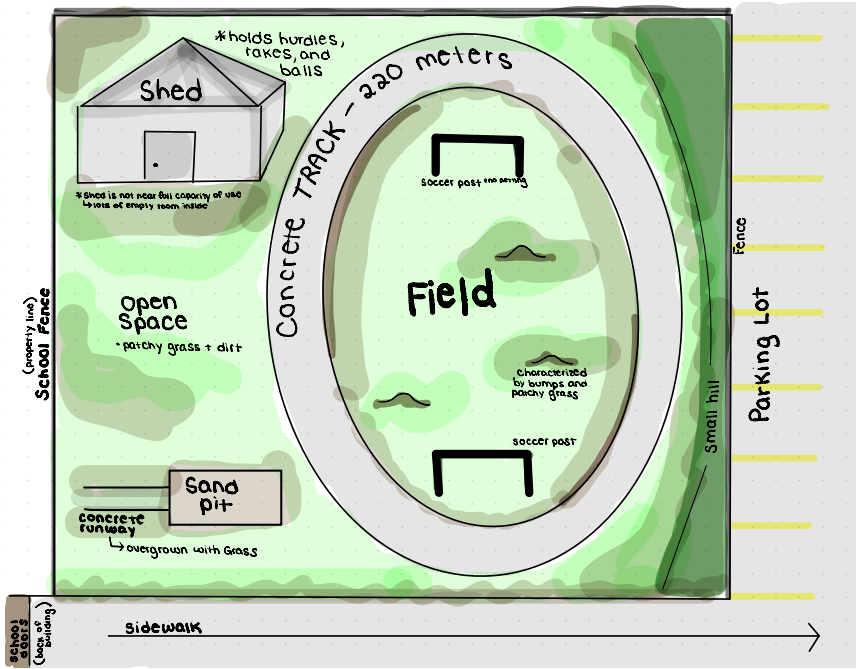
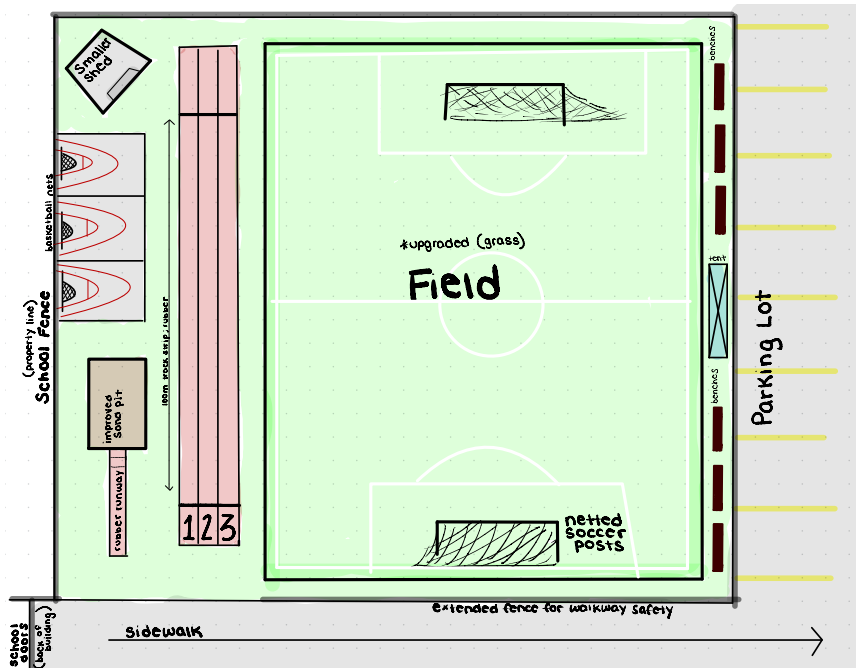


Figure 2

Re-imagined Field After Restoration



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