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Athletic fields in Newtown receive more than TLC from Winterberry Irrigation

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Recently, Jamie Gorton was talking to the father of one of his daughter's classmates. They were discussing Newtown, the Sandy Hook tragedy, and some of the things that are still needed to help the town along on its long, difficult road to recovery. Certainly there have been conversations like that every day for the last year-and-a-half all over town, but this one took on extra special significance because the father he was talking to was Carl Samuelson, assistant director of parks for Newtown, and Gorton himself is the general manager of Winterberry Irrigation in Southington. Samuelson said yes, Newtown's children would benefit greatly from an improved town soccer field, which was in a bit of disrepair and needed an irrigation system. That gave Gorton an idea.

He immediately spoke with Chris Daigle, owner of Winterberry, and both agreed that the company needed to get involved. Within moments it was decided that Winterberry - which had worked for Newtown in the past - would donate all the labor to repair and spruce up the field and install the irrigation system.

Back in Newtown, Samuelson reached out to other town vendors in an effort to have the actual materials provided. That way, the soccer field and surrounding park could become a shining example of what can be done with the spirit of help, hope and cooperation, which is precisely what is needed when fiscal realities sometimes put help, hope and cooperation on the back burner.

"The hardest part of the job, really, was coordinating our crew with the installation schedule, because there was essentially just a two-day window to get it all done - and the first day it rained buckets," Gorton said. "Overall, it took six of our guys just over two 12-hour days to get it done. But we got it done!"

That particular soccer field is one of the most heavily used in town; thousands of children play on it year in and year out.

"We knew from day one that we wanted to give back to a community that had endured so much heartache," Gorton adds. "We wanted to build something that kids today and in future generations will use with pleasure and pride."

According to Winterberry, well-maintained athletic fields and parks, particularly those that have state-of-the-art field irrigation systems, help protect student athletes, protect field-based structures such as bleachers, equipment sheds and concession stands from high repair and replacement costs, and improve town aesthetics, which all residents and local business owners appreciate. What's more, it helps the environment.

The same, of course, is true with school athletic fields. According to research by American School & University magazine, "The importance of athletic fields has increased in today's society because of the popularity of sporting events." But many athletic fields are outdated, overused, or both, and what many administrators don't initially realize is that issues can be traced to inadequate field

maintenance and a lack of proper irrigation.

Landscaping pros who have the skills, tools and technologies to repair and rejuvenate all kinds of athletic fields and parks are often the unsung heroes of many a municipal and educational improvement initiative. The Newtown soccer project, as important as it is, represents just a fraction of what a company like Winterberry has to offer. Infield skin repair, laser grading, deep tine soil fracturing, top dressing, sand injection, core aerating and other landscaping projects and methods are other tasks that can improve playability, reliability, safety and environmental responsibility. 'Green' irrigation, which helps avoid both over- and under-watering, achieves the healthiest turf possible while at the same time controlling costs.

Municipal leaders and school administrators who look to upgrade need to seek landscape contractors who are up to date on all modern irrigation methods and have people on staff who are certified irrigation designers, horticulturalists and specialists in everything from greenhouse supervision to facility management. In the past few years alone, Winterberry Irrigation has completed landscape projects for Yale University, Montaup Country Club, Fairfield University, Old Saybrook, Wesleyan University, Farmington, the United States Military Academy and many other schools and municipalities. Newtown holds a very special place on the list.

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