

Safety concerns to force closure of bleacher section inside Madison stadium

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After a review of the Madison High School athletics stadium, engineers recommended the eastern edge of the home stands be closed due to safety concerns. (Photo: Courtesy MHS)

The bleachers may be a bit more crowded for Madison High School football games and other athletic events next season after engineers recommended blocking off roughly one-third of seating on the home side of O.E. Roberts Stadium.

The deterioration of the nearly 50-year-old facility raises questions on how to pay for any potential renovations to the site. Voters in Madison County will again decide on a ¼-cent sales tax increase that school officials say could help generate revenue to raise teacher pay and finance a more than \$3 million project to revamp the 1972 stadium. The same referendum fell short of passage in the 2018 general election.

Engineers' reports

Concern over the safety of the facility has grown over time.

Joe Davis, Madison County Schools maintenance director, said it's an annual routine to inspect the stadium, patch concrete and address tripping hazards in the stands.

While cracks in the pavement may seem innocuous to the untrained eye, to engineers, crumbling concrete raises red flags. In a 2018 report to Davis, the Kessel Engineering Group said the stadium exhibited “significant signs of distress/deterioration.” Though a follow-up report from Kloesel Engineering gave the green light to use the stadium last year, it recommended a review after the 2018 football season to identify any new issues.



Madison County Schools Maintenance Director Joe Davis reaches into cracked concrete to highlight the patchwork needed to remediate tripping hazards at the Madison High School athletics stadium every year. (Photo: Paul Moon/The News-Record & Sentinel)

This year, in a July report to Madison County Schools Superintendent Will Hoffman, Kloesel Engineering listed concerns with the stadium, including spalled concrete, water drainage and a rotating retaining wall at the eastern end of the home stand between bleachers and the athletic track.

The report states “the movement of the slope has affected the bleacher system to an extent that we recommend not occupying this section of the bleachers.” The report recommends installing barricades to prevent access to the seating at that end of the stadium and the area above the retaining wall.

“Based on the recommendation from our engineer, we will close a portion of the stadium for this coming school year,” Hoffman said in a statement to The News-Record & Sentinel. “The closure will create some inconveniences, but it is important that all of our students and members of the public attending events in the stadium are safe.”

Funding repairs



Reports from engineers cited concerns with water seepage and a rotating retaining wall as reasons to block off seating at the eastern edge of the Madison High School stadium. *(Photo: Paul Moon/The News-Record & Sentinel)*

For Hoffman, finding a way to pay for repairs to the stadium is a priority that extends beyond just high school football games. The facility also hosts middle and high school soccer games, youth league activities, track and field meets, and events for the wider community, including Madison County Special Olympics and fundraisers like Walk of Life.

“Our stadium is a vital part of how our community comes together and we need to ensure that it is appropriately repaired so it can continue to serve our community for the next 50 years,” he said.

Preliminary cost estimates from PFA Architects put a \$3.8 million price tag on renovations. Hoffman said the need to meet current building codes, including making the site ADA compliant, contributes to the cost.



Cracked concrete at O.E Roberts Stadium, built in 1972, is a sign of the facility's "distress/deterioration," according to an engineer's report. (Photo: Paul Moon/The News-Record & Sentinel)

Like in 2018, school officials are hoping Madison County voters will approve a ¼-cent sales tax increase to help pay for the rehab work and more local funding for teacher salaries. In March, the Board of Education voted unanimously to back a resolution requesting the county's Board of Commissioners put the referendum back on the ballot for the 2020 primary. Commissioners approved that step in June.

“The revenue generated by the 1/4-penny sales tax could (and should) be used to pay for the financing of staff salary supplements and these long-range capital improvements,” Hoffman said.

Work to fence off the affected end of the stadium, which lies closest to the Ingels, will be completed before Madison High School’s first home football game, when the Patriots host local rival North Buncombe in the annual “Juice Jug” game Aug. 30.