



Editor [John Patten](#):

Board Wrestles with Association's Proposal

Watchung Hills Wrestling Association seeks permission to build on school land.

- By [John Patten](#) - [Email the author](#) - February 17, 2011

To the members of the Watchung Hills Wrestling Association, if the Warren Township Board of Education will let them build on district property, wrestling glory will come.

Association President Marc Hayward and member Matt Saum asked the board at Monday night's Board of Education meeting to consider a plan to build a 50-by-100-foot pole barn facility on land adjoining the district's buildings and grounds department facility on Mountain Avenue, near Watchung Hills Regional High School.

"The wrestling association has been around since '91 and has grown by leaps and bounds," Saum said, adding the group has more than 100 families involved and looked at more than 16 sites in the area as potential locations to build a facility. "And when we saw the buildings and grounds site, we saw the potential it had for everyone."

Saum said the group has the capability to independently raise the money needed to construct and finish the building, which could provide enough space for two 30-by-30-foot wrestling mats, a changing room—but no showers—bathrooms, office and a storage area.

"It won't create any burden on you—the wrestling association is prepared to raise all the funds," Saum said, adding the facility could offer a net gain for the district, alleviating the district of the need to schedule the space currently used by the association for practices and meets, as well as opening and heating school sites. "Those things aren't huge, [but] they are benefits to the district."

Saum continued by noting the facility would also be suitable for other groups to use in wrestling's off-season, such as cheerleading and gymnastics, and would bolster the program teaching young wrestlers in preparation of high school.

"Our high school is known for wrestling and we're right on the cusp of becoming one of the state's powerhouses," he said, adding the facility would add to the district's prestige in the wrestling community.

Board members were generally supportive of the plan, but had questions about how to structure such an arrangement, as well as whether it would create a precedent other associations would seek to follow.

Board member Anthony Sardis pointed to the arrangement between Watchung Hills Pop Warner Football and Somerset County for Pop Warner's long-term lease at East County Park as a possible model, although District Business Administrator Peter Daquila noted the land in question is deed-restricted to district use.

The board also sought to have the association pay for any necessary attorney reviews needed, which Hayward said should be possible, within reason.

But he added, the association's interest at Monday's meeting was only to measure the district's willingness to consider the plan.

"I'm willing to get my feet a little muddy, and I'm willing to spend some money, but I need to feel a little warm and fuzzy that, if it all makes sense ... (the board will proceed)," Hayward said.

Hayward and Saum noted the difficulties the group has had working with other land owners, such as when they attempted to renovate a county-owned barn to use as a facility.

After spending several years on the project, the county developed a plan requiring extensive renovations to the building and subordinated wrestling to other groups who got involved later. The wrestling association dropped out of that plan, which hasn't proceeded.

The group also needs to check on the availability of connecting to sewer lines in the area, which they conceded may not be possible. Hayward said he would contact township officials to find out if it can be done, and report back to the board.

The association will have a proposal outlining the possible lease and ownership of the building prepared by an attorney, which will also be vetted by an attorney for the school district.

