

## LOCAL PEOPLE

# Girl Scouts raise awareness on the dangers of artificial turf

● Middle schoolers' summer project grows into a campaign against harmful effects of turf

By Shiv Gurjar

On Sept. 26, Girl Scouts Jasmehar Kaur and Ruchi Ragahavan held a presentation at the Union City Library about artificial turf's harmful effects, environmentally friendly alternatives and local water rebate programs. The event marked not only a step toward earning their Girl Scouts Silver Award, but was also a part of their larger mission to educate the public about the environment.

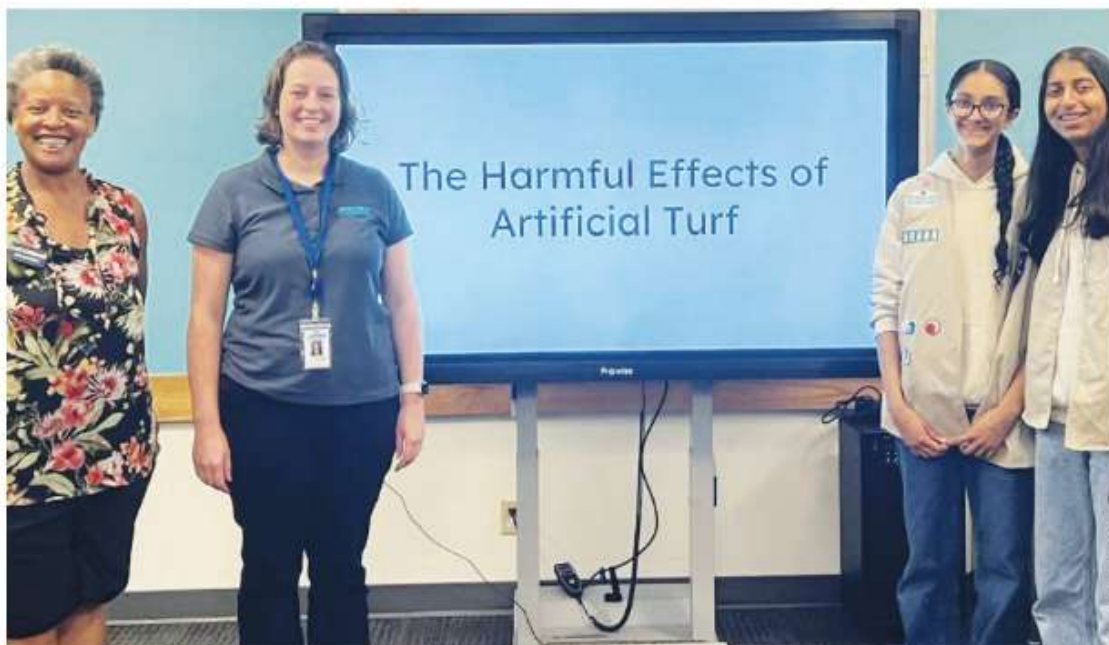
Kaur and Ragahavan, both eighth graders and members of Troop 30466, first launched the project during the summer, as part of their silver award—the second-highest award in Girl Scouts—which challenges members to identify a meaningful issue and take action to address it. United by a shared love for the environment, they looked around their community for ways to make a difference. Although they found various pressing issues, the topic of artificial turf in neighborhood parks and gardens stood out.

Artificial turf—made up of synthetic fibers—is often portrayed as a sustainable and maintenance-free alternative to grass. But through their research, the Girl Scouts found a stark difference between what was advertised and reality. Turf is not water-absorbent or biodegradable, which leads to large amounts of waste and physical pollution. The turf can also reach dangerously high temperatures and release carcinogens into the air.

"We didn't really know about the harmful effects, so we were like 'Whoa,'" said Ragahavan. "Especially the landfill and soil [impacts], we didn't know it caused that crazy of an impact."

Curious, they attended a presentation about artificial turf and alternatives by Lori Caldwell, an environmental educator for StopWaste. The session not only deepened their understanding and inspired them to pursue the topic further, but sparked a critical connection. Caldwell agreed to work with the pair as an advisor for their project.

When reflecting on what stood out about the students, Caldwell said, "Just their enthusiasm. They were focused on the topic, and that really got me because I always think it's important to be able to get involved in things like this, because of their future." She added,



**BRANCHING OUT** Jasmehar Kaur (wearing glasses) and Ruchi Ragahavan (far right) with Lori Caldwell of StopWaste (far left) and Jessica Swenson, a representative from Alameda County Water District.



**LOCAL ROOTS** At a presentation at Union City Library, Jasmehar Kaur and Ruchi Ragahavan shared their findings about artificial turf.

ed, "For them to kind of start early—I wasn't doing that in eighth grade. But for them to really focus on something like that—that's huge."

Their new support and confidence led them to explore other alternatives and incentives to make the switch easier. Kaur and Ragahavan contacted the Alameda County Water District (ACWD) team and were met with enthusiasm and support for their project, with ACWD sharing financial incentives to make the switch more sustainable like their Lawn Be Gone Rebate or Rain Barrel Rebates.

Meanwhile, Kaur and Ragahavan had also begun talking to friends and

neighbors about the issue. They created flyers and went door-to-door, knocking and spreading awareness of their findings. Their months of effort and learning culminated in their presentation at the Union City Library.

Hansneet Dhava, an attendee, learned a lot from the short display. "I thought artificial turf was a good way to save water. But I think the alternatives that they provided are much more effective than some synthetic stuff in a garden," she said.

Kaur and Ragahavan hope these efforts help to improve the environment. With safer and more sustainable alternatives like sheet-mulching, which

Caldwell recommends, and free mulch and compost provided around the city, the transition to greener options is made simpler for anyone to achieve.

"The presentation changed my perspective that you don't have to go and start building the latest technology to protect the environment," said Dhava. "It's the small steps that you take that make all the difference."

The Girl Scouts plan on expanding their reach and spreading more awareness. "We're going to the farmers' market and talk about this issue, hand out flyers," said Ragahavan, "and we're also trying to get another library session so that more people can attend."

Photos by Lipnesh Singh