

Pickleball facility is key to Aurora's sporting future, say Councillors



Pickleball is one of the fastest-growing sports in North America, and as Aurora Council prepares to return to the table this fall, lawmakers are hoping to 'serve' local enthusiasts with more opportunities to play.

This fall, Council will consider various options to offer more opportunities to play pickleball within the community.

Over the last few months, the Town has reconfigured some community tennis courts with additional lines to reflect pickleball's smaller game footprint, offered a number of summer drop-in sessions, and have tailored a fall program as well.

But, for pickleball enthusiasts, more needs to be done - including the delivery of a standalone court facility, potentially in the form of an air-supported dome.

Taking a break from a busy afternoon of gameplay on the Fleury Park courts on Thursday afternoon, Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese and Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland underscored the potential for the sport throughout Aurora.

'The original issue we had was just about capacity and around court availability because it was somewhat of a new sport, it had its loyal following at the beginning, and it became a bigger issue,' said Councillor Weese. 'This has come along well since this was brought (to Council) just a matter of four or five months ago; I'm really happy the Town has added some new things and, more importantly, that they have been listening to the pickleball community and that community isn't really quite as established yet.'

10.5 hours a week of game time has been added at available courts, including makeshift courts over the summer months when the ice is removed from the ice pads at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex and the Aurora Family Leisure Complex. Additional opportunities have been put in play at the Aurora Seniors' Centre.

'There has been a huge surge in people wanting to learn how to play pickleball, join intermediate leagues, you name it,' said Councillor Gilliland, adding that a pickleball tournament at the Fleury facilities this past spring drew participants from across Canada, and even some from the United States. 'It was a packed event and there is a lot of opportunity to have even more tournaments here to increase that play. I realize we don't have a lot of dedicated courts here, although we have these four courts (at Fleury), which are fantastic. Some of the challenges is it is a shared court with tennis and it (pickleball) is at a learning stage, so it will be interesting to see what developments come from that report that show how the shared courts of tennis versus pickleball turn out because it can be a bit challenging when you're trying to accommodate everyone, which is why we really need those dedicated courts.'

Looking at the results of the Town's pilot project so far, Councillor Gilliland said the data suggests a dedicated facility 'is something that would be of great need.' Tennis players, she said, want to keep their court times as much as they can, so a 'shared situation'

might be a challenge.

Councillor Weese pointed to the four courts at Fleury, noting that due to pickleball's smaller footprint, a court of similar size could accommodate up to 12 games at a time.

‘It’s a smaller space and it doesn’t need the same space as tennis does, that’s why a dedicated facility is good,’ he said. ‘Almost everywhere where pickleball starts, it starts on tennis courts and that also leads to animosity, sometimes, and shared facilities. We’re here to try and increase physical activity for everybody and not having people competing for space. We want to have spaces fully used when they are built. Right now, it’s a nice, recreational and social activity that people want to learn and play [but] at the end of the day people want competition, too. We’re getting to that point where it is nice to play, but it is also nice to compete and that extends the sport even further.’

Enthusiasts at the courts last week were in agreement that pickleball is a great way to foster social connections while staying active at the same time. Councillor Weese says it’s a sport that is ‘relatively easy to learn but hard to master.’ Councillor Gilliland, on the other hand, has been bitten by the pickleball bug, having first taken it up this past April and is now fully immersed in the sport.

‘There have been a lot of memes and reels out there describing how pickleball is one of those things that start off as a curiosity and then the next thing you find yourself part of a league you didn’t think you were going to be a part of,’ she says. ‘You’ve got paddles, you’ve got shoes, and all of a sudden you can’t wait to get on the court and win that next round robin.’

‘We’re trying to increase our economic dollars and Aurora has a huge opportunity to capitalize on that. We can be put on the map’bring in those economic dollars, and that would be great for everybody.’

For more opportunities on how to get involved in pickleball at the municipal level, visit aurora.ca/pickleball.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter