

Pickleball surges in popularity, Town seeks solutions for lack of court space



Pickleball has seen a surge in popularity and it's only a matter of time before hundreds of residents are engaging in the friendly and competitive game in Aurora, so long as enough court space can be found.

As there are currently over 300 players in Aurora, a number that is forecast to grow exponentially in upcoming years, delegates from across Town have expressed the need for indoor and outdoor facilities to be added to the Town's Parks and Recreation Master Plan.

Gord Kerr, a member of the Aurora Pickleball Group, who has worked with Tennis and construction facilities since 1978, said the Town has two dedicated pickleball courts which isn't enough to support the pickleball players.

In his proposal to Council on February 28, Kerr suggested painting pickleball lines on top of an underutilized tennis court and considering the building of a six to ten court facility in the future.

"It's going to bring in revenue to Aurora, and you're going to get yourself back on the map," he said.

Kerr noted that the existing pickleball courts in Aurora are both minimal and unsafe to play on.

He said that there is no fencing and a tripping hazard at the court edge, making the few existing courts difficult to play in, and putting the Town far behind other municipalities such as Richmond Hill, which he noted has over 20 indoor pickleball courts and will install a new 16-court facility at the Observatory this year.

Kerr said one possibility is to rejig two tennis courts into four pickleball courts, as pickleball courts are smaller in size than the average tennis court, then scheduling allotted tennis and pickleball play times.

"At least that gets you some instant pickleball courts for now," he said.

An indoor facility and clubhouse could then be built and completed for 2025, he said, noting that there is room to install a new 12-court facility in the unused area near Edward Coltham Park at 95 William Graham Drive.

"If we have to help you, if we have to do some fundraising or something, you tell me what park you want to do and I will design it, I'll put it all together and give you some budget proposals so that you can put it together," Kerr said.

Jane Snape, Pickleball Coordinator for the Aurora's Senior Association, said the group offers beginner women's and men's separate pickleball sessions and mixed doubles play both at the Aurora Seniors' Centre and at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex.

Currently, she maintains a list of about 200 senior members from Aurora who are interested in playing pickleball, many of whom are forced to stay indoors to play pickleball during the cold seasons of the year.

'Our Seniors' Association membership is extremely active, and we want to stay healthy and fit, physically and mentally, by playing pickleball. But we desperately need more pickleball indoor facilities so that everyone who wants to learn to play and enjoy pickleball can do so,' Snape said.

'The one pickleball court at the senior center is used for the majority of our pickleball activities, a total of 30 now. We use the three courts at the Leisure Complex for a total of six hours, but there is a huge demand for indoor pickleball play for all ages.'

Snape requested that more time be given at the Leisure Complex for pickleball hours, in hopes that the general recreational time can be returned to the time it had been allotted before the pandemic.

Furthermore, she said that court time should not be regulated for one hour of play the same way as tennis courts. Rather, just like the Aurora tennis club does now, players should be able to book a daily time slot, Snape said.

Although the Parks and Recreation Master Plan update in 2016 intended to create opportunities for outdoor pickleball through the use of a multi-purpose court template, such as utilizing existing tennis courts, Snape believes that the experiment failed as the time allotted to pickleball was during the 'heat of the day' and tennis players were generally not in favor of sharing their court.

'Aurora needs a pickleball club, but you can't have a pickleball club without a dedicated pickleball facility,' she said, adding that the game has grown to encompass a variety of ages, not just older adults.

Tournaments require locations not dependent on the weather, she said, noting that Canadian winters can also be very destructive for outdoor courts and making an indoor facility could be more cost effective in the long run.

'Pickleball is affordable, easy to learn and play and provides fun friendship and community for all ages. Please make sure that the new Parks and Recreation Master Plan includes both outdoor and indoor pickleball courts in future predictions,' Snape said.

Michael Bowcott, President of the Richmond Hill Pickleball Club and founder of the Richmond Hill Pickleball Network, which currently holds over 900 members, was also in attendance at the committee meeting to share his insights on why pickleball has become the fastest growing sport in North America.

Some see it as a competitive sport, some as a social game, and others as a therapy, he said.

The Richmond Hill Pickleball Network started almost two years ago and grew to become the largest network in Canada with over 900 members, he said, simply through word of mouth.

Spending the last year working with Council in Richmond Hill, Bowcott helped spearhead the building of 16 dedicated pickleball courts.

From a grassroots perspective, Bowcott says he has also seen the sudden popularity of pickleball in his interactions when offering free lessons in the summer. 'The people that came out to them were mostly women, and by word of mouth, we grew from zero to 150 by the end of the summer, and I was just working July and August.'

'The people were telling me how this game would change their lives, people that showed up there that I thought it would never see again, kept coming back, they kept coming back, and they kept getting better and better,' he said.

'This is more than a game, it's more than a sport. I've kind of joked about it and referred to it as a therapy for many people. And

you're going to face increasing demands over the next year or two.?

Different cultures, backgrounds, and ages can be found playing the sport, the average age being 52 years old, Bowcott said, adding that it is ?a game that will bring a community together like no other.?

With over 900 pickleball club members in Richmond Hill, the city has recently secured a facility in Vaughan to offer more opportunities.

Bowcott predicts that the sport will continue to see a surge in popularity and that municipalities will face increased pressure to provide more opportunities to play, but also to find suitable locations that can support the increasing demand for pickleball.

?I think the key for you is to really put together a strategy for pickleball. You have to locate them in the right areas, you should go with a multi-court facility, and try to avoid the expedient solution of painting lines on [tennis courts] because you will create tensions between the tennis players and pickleball players,? he said.

?So, I would encourage you to build pickleball into your masterplan, give it consideration, because there's no doubt in my mind that you are going to face increasing pressures and as you run out of suitable places for these locations.?

Bill Maron from Total Tennis Inc. said that in his experience operating a dual-court facility for tennis and pickleball in London, Ontario, he has seen Pickleball increase by 700 members over the course of four years, whereas tennis increased by 150 in the same amount of time.

The facility originally started as a tennis club, giving tennis players longer booking privileges, until they found that the courts weren't filling up.

?We did have this indoor club in London that was open seven days a week, 14 hours a day, six dedicated pickleball courts at the time, and six dedicated tennis courts. So, we had three 400 people, you know, every day in the facility, moving about playing their game,? he said.

Players may be happier having separate court space, Maron said, however, he noted that tennis players eventually accepted the sounds of the ball hitting the paddle or the jovial excitement of the social pickleball sport.

For shared court space, the facility painted pickleball court lines in a light gray color intended to be less of a distraction to tennis players.

?Realistically, any facility where you play a sport there is rarely perfect,? Marson said. ?So, what I have come to know is you get used to your facility.?

Council endorsed a motion put forward by Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese and Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland directing staff to ?explore ways to increase the number of pickleball courts in Aurora, possibly for this season? and report back on options and budget considerations through the Parks & Recreation Master Plan.

By Elisa Nguyen