

Shared court space provide pickleball opportunities for the summer

Pickleball opportunities in Aurora are being looked at for this summer, with various options including additional playtime at existing recreation centers and making use of existing courts and future planning has begun for the sport.

A trial arrangement will take place this summer requiring tennis players and pickleball players to share court space, stirring opposing views from Councillors concerned about potential problems between players.

Opportunities that can be immediately implemented within the operating budget for the summer 2023 include extra playtime hours at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex and the Aurora's Seniors' Centre. In addition, drop-in pickleball sessions can be available for 18 hours a week at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex and 12 hours a week at the Aurora Community Center (ACC) for this summer.

Staff are also organizing a pickleball tournament in July at the ACC which will include three divisions (Men's/Women's/Mixed) resulting in 32 players per division, an initiative aligned with the Town's Sport Tourism Strategy.

Regarding pickleball opportunities that can be implemented for this summer, but that require extra direction due to a change in service level or additional funding, the report received by Council looked at reallocating existing courts by way of various options.

One option looks at adding pickleball lines to two tennis courts at Fleury Park at an approximate cost of \$1,500, and another looks at adding pickleball lines to all four tennis courts for an approximate cost of \$3,000.

The option of adding additional lines to existing courts has several pros and cons. On one hand, there is available parking on-site, washrooms, lights, and the central location to Aurora's core. Furthermore, it increases pickleball court service levels while maintaining tennis court service level.

However, sharing courts may not be ideal for either tennis or pickleball players as they will need to compete for court time, adjust the heights of nets, and consider sound impacts felt by nearby residences. Another option would be to dedicate court time at specific parks, which would have no cost to implement beyond the costs for signage.

However, it may be difficult to find a schedule that suits all participants as most would want prime time and weekend spots.

The report suggested that a schedule be posted for court times at Norm Weller and Fleury Parks, but that if it becomes unmanageable, players may have to resort to a first come-first service basis.

The first come-first service will have a mandatory requirement that tennis players allow the next to play on the hour, but the recommendation for pickleball players is to have a 'paddle rack' method where players simply add their paddle to a rack mounted on the fence to signify they're next in line to play. When the game is complete after around 11 rounds, they will be rotated in to play.

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo voiced concerns about having players share a court based on first come-first service.

'I'll be honest, I'm a little concerned about it,' he said, adding that while this is only a preliminary testing, tennis players could potentially have trouble finding court space later on in the summer.

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland noted that while the use of indoor centers is a good step, there is still a need for outdoor courts. She put forward a motion to add a recommendation that staff could report back with possible private commercial parking lot opportunities that could be used as alternative qualifications for outdoor use.

Parking lot use for temporary pickleball courts was considered but then deemed not ideal due to either a lack of vacant sites and cost

to prepare the site for safe and functional use, the report said.

Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim said he looks forward to seeing a long-term plan and designated area for pickleball.

"My concern is that I don't think the popularity of one should lead to potentially the demise of another sport," he said, adding that there may be potential competition for court usage.

"They're both great sports and they both deserve their own playing areas. So, in the long-term, you know, I'm looking forward to a long term plan and a designated area or two for pickleball. But these temporary solutions, I can't buy into one unless staff has done a thorough report on Norm Weller, and the traffic is just not there," Councillor Kim said on Norm Weller currently being the only site recommended for shared court usage.

Robin McDougall, Director of Community Services, noted that one benefit of dedicated court time is that people know exactly when to show up.

"Until we have a chance to see the summer happen, we will not have that analysis to back that this is the right method or not. In the long run, sharing courts is not ideal for either sport, it is not the long range plan. These were short term suggestions for how we handle this coming summer, just more of a trial," she said. "At this point, I don't have data to verify this is necessarily the right move, but it's a suggestion other municipalities have implemented it."

Still unconvinced that sharing courts is a viable short-term solution, Councillor Kim said he wondered whether it could create problems between residents.

"I just don't like residents competing against residents for a scarce resource. And I don't want to solve a problem by creating another problem. And that's my concern," he said.

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese acknowledged the concerns shared by Councillor Kim and the potential conflicts that could arise, but also noted the conversations with pickleballers which indicated that dedicated courts may be the best solution.

"I think this is a short-term solution in order to find out where we are. And when I hear that we're going to be looking at this on a complaint driven method, I wonder if there's another way we can try to identify the number of people that are playing and do some metrics, because if you can't measure it, you really can't manage it very well," he said. "The solutions [proposed] here have actually come out of the pickleball users and some tennis people there because nobody wants that conflict. We don't want to set this up for failure at all, so I think it's a reasonable compromise, but it's not perfect."

Agreeing that the proposal is a good place to start, Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she believes that things will work out and that it's worth giving it a try to accommodate the growing number of pickleball players in Town.

By Elisa Nguyen