



Recommendations for the Construction or Installation of Public Pickleball Courts in BC Communities

Tennis BC

February 2021

1. The Issue

Some local individuals and groups are lobbying municipal governments to superimpose pickleball lines onto tennis courts, and to convert tennis courts into pickleball courts. The dramatic growth of pickleball certainly warrants more public pickleball courts. However, adding pickleball lines to tennis courts is a conflict-laden, “Band-Aid” solution that reduces the enjoyment of both sports. Creating dedicated pickleball centres or hubs by resurfacing existing tennis courts often just creates the need for more tennis courts. We therefore urge municipalities to fully explore the possibility of creating entirely new pickleball hubs before they consider dual purposing or repurposing any tennis courts.

2. Background

Tennis BC is a non-profit society with 78 members clubs, including 19 clubs and associations that utilize public facilities. It represents 22,000 tournament, league, and club players and an estimated 900,000 occasional public court players.¹ As the recognized provincial sport association for tennis, it advocates for all tennis players and tennis organizations throughout the province.

Pickleball has exploded onto the scene in North America in the past ten years. The Sports Fitness Industry Association reports that pickleball is one of the fastest growing sports in North America with a 650 percent increase in numbers between 2013 and 2019.^{2,3} Between 2009 and 2017, the number of pickleball venues in North America grew from 420 to about 5000.⁴ This number rose to over 8000 by the end of 2019.⁵ There are about 75,000 pickleball players in Canada.^{6,7} BC is a “hotspot” for the sport. Five of the ten “First Organizers of Pickleball in Canada” are British Columbians.⁸ In the past ten years, the sport has gained a large, enthusiastic following in many areas of our province.

Canada is also experiencing a “tennis boom.” This is due in large part to the success and popularity of Canada’s top professional players including BC’s Vasek Pospisil and Ontario’s Bianca Andreescu. Vasek helped carry Canada’s Davis Cup team to its first ever World Final in 2019, and Bianca upset Serena Williams to win the 2019 US Open Championships. Between 2016 and 2018, there was a 36% increase in the number of Canadian tennis players who played

at least once a week during the summer, including a 32% increase in the number of children under 12.⁹ There are about 2.9 million Canadians who play tennis at least once a week, in season.¹

Racquet sports can provide a lifetime of physical and mental health benefits to their participants. Tennis and pickleball develop coordination, balance, flexibility, strength, speed, endurance, and agility. These characteristics allow pickleball and tennis players to stay active, have fun, and maintain their quality of life well into their 80s and 90s. Pickleball is an exceptionally social sport.^{10, 11} Dr. Aaron Baggish (2020) notes that, "Social networking and the number and quality of social connections are emerging as huge determiners of health and longevity."¹² Likewise, a recently published study found that playing tennis extends a person's life expectancy by 9.7 years over someone with a sedentary lifestyle.¹³ Those who regularly play racquet sports are 56% less likely than others to die at any given moment of cardiovascular disease, and 47% less likely than others to die at any given moment of any cause.¹⁴

Pickleball and tennis players derive healthier and happier lifestyles from their sports. Communities, in turn, benefit from more active and engaged citizens. Communities may also obtain commercial benefits from having a proper pickleball hub. The Oliver Parks and Recreation Society (OPRS), Oliver Tennis Club and Oliver Pickleball Club note that, "By improving the court space here, we anticipate that Oliver's appeal as a home or destination for visitors will be more desirable. This will enhance opportunities for economic development and tourism for the benefit of all."¹⁵

While it is true that other sports (hockey – ringette; basketball – volleyball; swimming – water polo) compete for public venue time, these sports require much more expensive facilities (rinks, gymnasiums, and pools, respectively) than tennis and pickleball. Excellent quality pickleball courts can be built for about \$25,000 per court and can often be built on small areas of existing public parks.¹⁵

By supporting pickleball and tennis, communities are supporting two highly inclusive sports that have a relatively low risk of injury. The growing number of tennis and pickleball players, and the highly favourable cost-benefit ratio of these sports, suggest that pickleball courts and tennis courts are excellent investments for most BC communities.

3. Recommendations

We understand that “one size does not fit all.” Here, we rank our recommendations from the one that is most desirable (Option 1) to the one that is least desirable (Option 3), recognizing that different communities have different circumstances, needs, and means. Despite this paper's best intentions, this is a municipal issue and true progress will only come from local leaders in your community.

Option 1

Build a dedicated pickleball centre or hub without repurposing any tennis courts.

Discussion

This model best meets the needs of both growing sports. It provides pickleball courts without reducing the number of, or access to, tennis courts. This model has been used with tremendous success in BC communities such as Vernon, West Kelowna, and Rutland. This option:

- Provides dedicated pickleball courts with permanent nets and appropriate fencing.
- Can include seating for spectators and for players waiting to take the court.
- Provides a facility that your residents will point to with pride and an amenity that enhances your community's appeal as a potential home or vacation spot.

The cost of building and maintaining pickleball courts is minimal compared to that of most recreational facilities (rinks, pools, gymnasiums, fields, etc.). Eight pickleball courts have roughly the same footprint as two tennis courts. Local pickleball associations often have strong connections to local businesses that can help sponsor a municipal facility. For example, the Vernon Pickleball Association raised more than one million dollars in just three weeks to enclose its 12 courts.¹⁶

This option allows the most freedom and flexibility in choosing a location for a pickleball hub. Ideally, a pickleball hub will be distanced at least 50 meters from nearby tennis courts and at least 150 meters from neighbouring homes. These distances will help buffer the significant noise that solid pickleball paddles make as they strike hard pickleballs.^{17, 18}

Option 2

Build a dedicated pickleball hub by repurposing some tennis courts.

Discussion

Like Option 1, this option also eliminates disputes over shared courts although the two groups will likely have disagreements over how many courts to convert and which ones. This model has been used successfully in BC communities such as Kelowna, Richmond, and Kamloops.

Tennis courts are sometimes underutilized because of their location or their condition. If a community decides to repurpose some tennis courts then the community planning phase (to determine how many courts to convert and which ones) should include fair and meaningful consultations with the community's tennis and pickleball populations. Important considerations for Option 2's planning and implementation include the following:

- The popularity of tennis is growing and communities choosing this option may find themselves short of tennis courts in the very near future.
- If some of a particular park's tennis courts are converted to pickleball courts then signs should clearly stipulate that only tennis is permitted on the remaining courts or that tennis has priority at all times on the remaining tennis courts.
- Pickleball can be played in community and school gymnasiums. Children's "red ball" tennis and a sport called touch tennis can be played in gymnasiums but actual tennis cannot. Only a few BC communities have public indoor tennis facilities, thus public tennis in BC is generally restricted to outdoor play in the months that it is possible.
- Note the noise concerns regarding pickleball court location already discussed under Option 1.

Option 3

Add pickleball lines to some tennis courts and institute a court booking system or post signage clearly indicating which sport has priority or exclusive use of the courts at which times.

Discussion

This option is not recommended. It has served as a temporary “Band-Aid” solution in several BC communities before they moved forward with Option 1 or 2. If this option is selected then the community planning phase (to determine how many tennis courts to multi-line, how to multi-line the courts, and how to schedule their usage) should include fair and meaningful consultations with the community’s tennis and pickleball populations.

Osborne describes the multi-line option as a “recipe for conflict.”¹⁹ Council meetings across the province have been dealing with heated disputes between tennis and pickleball players fighting for court time. Describing a clash in Courtenay, journalist Debra Martin writes, “If it wasn’t exactly like the feudin’ Hatfields and McCoys, it was pretty darn close.”²⁰ Central to the conflict is a clash of sport cultures. Tennis players arrive at public courts as a pair or a group of four. They play for 30 minutes or one set and then hand the court over to any players who have been waiting. Pickleball players typically arrive in large groups and continuously “rotate in” for two or more hours before giving the courts up.

The number of tennis players in BC is growing. While Option 2 literally reduces the number of community tennis courts, Option 3 effectively reduces the number of community tennis courts by reducing their availability.

There are many different schemes (number of courts and their orientation) for lining pickleball courts on a tennis court. Each of these schemes has inherent problems that leave one or both groups unsatisfied. In several schemes, the pickleball lines extend beyond the tennis lines. If choosing this option, even as a temporary fix, be sure that the apron around the tennis courts provides sufficient area to play pickleball safely. Tennis players will eventually stop playing on shared courts if there isn’t a booking system or at least clear rules designating which sport has priority or exclusive use of the courts at which times.

The preceding three options provide a framework that Tennis BC hopes will assist any community or organization struggling with this pressing issue. Tennis BC is more than willing to work with any BC community or organization on any matters related to tennis at any time. Email Mark Roberts, CEO – Tennis BC, mroberts@tennisbc.org.

Notes

For complete publication data on the works cited below, see the bibliography.

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2. Sports Fitness Industry Association, 2020
3. Loudin, 2019
4. Amazin' Aces, 2020
5. USA Pickleball, 2020
6. Maki, 2019
7. SFIA, 2019
8. Pickleball Canada, 2020
9. Tennis Canada, 2019
10. Lanzito, 2018
11. Owens, 2019
12. Harvard Health Letter, 2020
13. Schnohr et al., 2018
14. Oja et al., 2017
15. OPRS et al., 2020
16. Vernon Morning Star, 2020
17. Pickleball Portal, 2020a
18. Jones, 2020
19. Osborne, 2018
20. Martin, 2017

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