



CITY OF SANTA BARBARA
PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION REPORT

AGENDA DATE: February 23, 2022
TO: Parks and Recreation Commission
FROM: Recreation Division, Parks and Recreation Department
SUBJECT: Tennis and Pickleball Program Report

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Commission:

- A. Receive a presentation on the status of tennis and pickleball programming conducted at Parks and Recreation Department (Department) facilities; and
- B. Concur with the staff recommendation to return to the open play model for pickleball in conjunction with the 2022/23 annual pass renewal process beginning July 1, 2022.

DISCUSSION:

Background

The Department is responsible for operating, scheduling, and maintaining public tennis and pickleball facilities at the Municipal Tennis Center (MTC) and Oak Park, and shares the operation of Pershing Park with Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) through a joint use agreement. Historically, the courts at Municipal Tennis Center (12), Oak Park (2), and Pershing Park (8) provided a combination of free and fee based youth, adult, and tournament tennis play. Two courts at MTC and eight at Pershing Park are lit until 10:00 pm to provide court access beyond a typical workday.

In fall 2014, the Department entered into preliminary conversations regarding the possibility of developing public pickleball programming at the Municipal Tennis Center and began with temporarily converting one tennis court into four pickleball courts using taped lines. Since that time, the Department has partnered with the Pickleball community to permanently convert three tennis courts into twelve pickleball courts and four blended lined courts, and is working with Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) to add additional blended lined courts at Pershing Park during their resurfacing project scheduled for May 2022.

Tennis Programming

The Department currently operates fee based recreational, competitive, and instructional tennis play at the Municipal Tennis Center, including permitted and drop-in play for all ages, youth camps and clinics, adult lessons, and court rentals. Additionally, the Department has partnered with the Tennis Patrons of Santa Barbara since 1971 to foster the growth and improve the quality of junior tennis in Santa Barbara, and host local and regional United States Tennis Association (USTA) tournaments for youth and adults. Free play is available daily at Oak Park and on weekday evenings and weekends at Pershing Park.

Prior to, and continuing through the economic downturn, while youth and adult tennis instruction continued to be popular, recreational tennis and permitted play declined significantly at the local and national level. As a result, the Department began evaluating the declining trend, which led to programmatic and operational changes.

Pickleball Programming

Starting in 2015, the Department implemented a permitted recreational drop-in play program similar to the tennis model. The Department subsequently developed extremely popular instructional clinics and spring and fall leagues, and permits the annual Santa Barbara Riviera Pickleball Tournament, organized by Santa Barbara Pickleball.

The sport of pickleball continues to be the fastest growing activity in the nation, especially in communities that have favorable year-round weather and had existing tennis facilities and infrastructure. Locally, the Department has witnessed exponential growth from four active members in 2015 to 227 pre-pandemic, and currently 893 members, with an additional 512 participating in instructional clinics. Additionally, in the past several years, the City of Goleta and Santa Barbara County Parks converted or constructed eight local pickleball courts for public play.

Pandemic Trends

Prior to the pandemic, participation in tennis programming remained steady, while pickleball grew in popularity using a model called “open play,” whereby individual players were encouraged to join existing games, meet fellow pickleball players, and make new friends. Early in the pandemic, the first locally issued Public Health Officer Order for re-opening outdoor activities included tennis and pickleball as an essential operation. To manage providing access to the courts, the Department implemented a pre-registration system using an on-line application called SignUp Genius (SUG). The use of SUG enabled the Department to safely restart tennis and pickleball programming while meeting all of the required health and safety protocols. As Santa Barbara County emerged from the pandemic, staff heard support for continuing a reservation system for tennis and a mix of opposition and support for continuing the system for pickleball. Continuing the

reservation system supports individuals interested in scheduling court time around their schedule and other commitments, wanting to play with players of the same ability, or who may not be comfortable with some of the social nuances associated with the open play model. At the same time, there was support for returning to the open play model to enable more inclusivity, and return to how the sport was started locally and is commonly played almost everywhere. To gain more perspective, the Department initiated several surveys focused on options for reserved and open play. Given the interest in both open play and reserved play, the Department developed the hybrid system that is currently in place.

While all tennis play remains by court reservation, the aforementioned pickleball hybrid system was developed to balance access for reserved and open play, especially during the morning hours (8:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.), when there is the highest demand. During the morning hours, eight of the twelve (67%) dedicated pickleball courts are available for open play and the remaining four courts (33%) are available for reserved play using SUG. All other hours are by reservation only, and pickleball clinics were moved to the blended lined courts in the Municipal Stadium to maximize the number of dedicated courts available for play.

A successful open play model averages five players per-court who rotate into matches, whereas reserved play averages four players per-court for the same two-hour period of time. This equates to approximately 60 players per two-hour period in open play versus 48 during reserved play. Unfortunately, the SUG system cannot be configured to restrict the number of reservations per-player per-week. Many of the same players take advantage of the reservation system by reserving multiple times during the week while also playing with friends during their reserved times, and participating in open play. This results in inequitable access for other pickleball players.

Facility Management

Part time monitors are scheduled from 7:45 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. (adjusted seasonally) at the parking lot entrance to verify annual passes, collect drop-in fees for daily play, and open and close the parking lot gate. Additionally, the Sports Supervisor or Coordinator rotate their schedules to work from the on-site office so they can support hourly staff, facilitate and observe tennis and pickleball programming, and conduct facility inspections and submit work orders for maintenance and repair items.

RECOMMENDATION:

Due to the significant amount of staff time required to manage SUG, and the inability for configuring the system to limit reservations and provide equitable access for all pickleball players, staff recommends that the Commission approve the return to the open play model for pickleball at the beginning of the new fiscal year, July 1, 2022. The staff recommendation coincides with the 2022/23 annual pass renewal process which also begins July 1, 2022.

BUDGET/FINANCIAL INFORMATION:

The FY 2022 General Fund Operating Budget for the annual program is \$707,184 which covers staffing, supplies, routine and planned maintenance costs, and resurfacing eight pickleball courts and six tennis courts. Revenues from tennis and pickleball permits total \$336,470, and the Department subsidizes the program by \$370,714 (52%). Since 2015, the Department has spent \$80,000 to convert tennis courts into dedicated and blended line courts, and SB Pickleball has contributed \$15,000 for court fencing to improve each dedicated court and safe play.

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