**How to Introduce Pickleball to Your Community & Overcome Objections**

by Steve Manolis Last update 4/2/21

The following should serve as a guideline for working with city parks and recreation in introducing pickleball within your community. The focal point of this paper is to anticipate and answer objections that often occur when presenting the idea of pickleball to a community or city.

The process can be slow and tedious as there are many obstacles you will naturally be faced with, below are some: all of which, have a solution.

* Park officials/government entities not familiar with pickleball
* HOA’s considering conversions or adding courts for pickleball vs homeowner objections
* Public tennis courts that do not allow play other than tennis
* The public is not familiar with pickleball, or it is a fad.
* Concerns about noise issues
* Cost concerns (developing pickleball courts or lines)
* Confusion of added lines on existing courts

I will attempt to answer each of these, although there is a natural start prior to addressing the issues. And with most cases you will need to understand what, if any, concerns there currently are.

**First, identify your advocates,** those that will help you and your team through the process. Advocates can be fellow players, city officials, heads of HOA’s, park employees, tennis players, park coordinators…really anyone that you can count on to push forward.

**Second, identify those who might oppose pickleball**. Find out what their concerns are, it will help you form your approach and presentation. Those that oppose adding courts will tell you directly what your path will look like. This is not the time to argue your case, rather to understand what you will be faced and how to build your presentation. Talk less, listen more. DO NOT BE DEFENSIVE

What can you do with folks that oppose pickleball, find out why they oppose it, invite them to play, show them videos, they can turn out to be your biggest advocates.

**The process of conversion**…the above is relatively easy, although it does require working with people; it really should be a focus on listening to the concerns and understanding their point of view.

You should not attempt to address their concerns or become defensive, rather use your ears. You will hear, most likely, ‘pickleball is loud and distracting, people can’t cope with the constant noise’, I would say in response that I understand this is a concern as pickleball can be very enthusiastic and move on. Later you will address the technology that has helped pickleball equipment to be less ‘noisy’.

Stay away from the cliches of pickleball, “It’s the serious game with the funny name, or ‘fastest growing sport in America” Its true pickleball is growing, it isn’t the fastest, but you may be tasked to prove it.

***Source your data. See the appendix for the most recent data.***

**Preparation before you do anything else. Know the battlefield. Build your team**

Here, you will find and look for the following types of people: **the influencers, the decision makers and the ones that are ‘blocks in the road’.**

You want to find your advocates and influencers; those are the ones that can help you move forward. They will help introduce you to other advocates and influencers. They will also be essential in getting you to the decision makers.

With your advocates, and this certainly doesn’t come overnight, you will want to understand their concerns in pickleball, and talk about them.

Eventually you will want to work with your advocates in getting public opinion of pickleball from the general public, establish a focus group and send out surveys.

You will want to find and identify potential places to build or modify existing and future court locations, or places that you may convert to dual sport (indoors or outdoors). Be cognitive of the surroundings: too close to houses or neighborhoods, parking availability, road access, lighting (for night play) and physical condition of the courts. Be cognitive of impact from noise of the game and traffic (from players going to the courts).

Ultimately you will want to create a plan of action with your advocates to bring to the decision makers

 **Addressing the obstacles:**

• **Park officials/government entities not familiar with pickleball**

Pickleball has continued to gain popularity, even during the Covid concerns in 2020. Although there has been a damper on tournaments and events, people are looking for outdoor activities especially with family and close friends. The huge growth in 2020 has been recreational play. As a result, you will find more people familiar with the sport despite not playing pickleball. None-the-less there are those that never heard of it or think it’s an RV park sport or a sport for retirees. Ask them to watch videos, introduce them to the websites, ad invite them to watch some games that are being played.

• **Public tennis courts that do not allow play other than tennis**

The plan of action above should include how to overcome any ordnances that might be preventing pickleball play. Part of the plan is to get a public consensus regarding any ordnance, should they exist.

We cannot forget we are talking about public places to play. The public’s wishes need to be addressed by park and planning officials. In Phoenix, we have such an ordinance, but we overcame it recently because pickleball players asked and local ambassadors worked with influencers at parks and rec and a survey went out. Over 85% of the tennis respondents said they had no problem sharing court time.

Public opinion, through social media, direct surveys and focus groups are highly influential, and generally listened to.

The same process can be used in adapting modifications such as going from temporary lines to permanent lines, scheduling or adding courts to existing programs.

Also monitor existing court usage, especially if this will be a dual-purpose court. You will need to chart the number of people that play, times they play, days they play. At three parks in three cities we monitored court activity of tennis only play…the results were the courts were used roughly 20% of the time. We eventually got courts built in all three locations.

A chart like the one below can be AMAZINGLY effective and tells a visually impactful story:

Daily attendance of tennis players at the XYZ park (4 tennis courts) at various times of the day. Use some friends to help you track usage over a few weeks, vary the days and times, and take photos.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Day of the week** | **Monday** | **Tuesday** | **Wednesday** | **Thursday** | **Friday** | **Saturday** | **Sunday** |
| **Time Frame** | 6am-9am | Noon to 2pm | 5pm-8pm | Noon-2pm | 3pm-5pm | 6am-9am | Noon-3pm |
| **Number of players** | 4 | 6 | 4 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| **Number of courts used** | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

**• The public not familiar with pickleball**

Getting the public involved can follow a variety of paths. The easiest is to introduce pickleball to tennis and racquetball players, also to families, schools and kids. The similarities of the game are, in concept, obvious.

My wife, who is a 40-year veteran of tennis, a 4.5 caliber player, was introduced to pickleball by some tennis friends who also played pickleball. She, in turn, has taught pickleball to other tennis friends. It’s a simple as ‘try it you might like it’. Another saying I hear a lot is that tennis players are one injury away from being pickleball players. I have met many friends that are former racquet and handball players. It seems the transition to pickleball is that it can be a slower game and easier on the body.

The other avenue for non-racquet/paddle type players is a bit harder in general as any game involving a ball or ‘hitting device’ requires good hand-eye coordination.

Regardless, it’s just a matter of going out and asking people to play, as you most likely know, when there is any kind of sport activity going on people are watching, for pickleball it’s a matter of stopping playing and asking them to come ‘hit a few’

Make sure you carry a few extra paddles.

For communities, parks and HOA type areas, you can have a more selective approach by offering to do a few beginner lessons to sort of ease the tension of this *strange game*.

• **Concerns about noise issues**

It is my belief that this concern is one that should never be defended very well, and simply be acknowledged. Right or wrong, good or bad, this is big one. It faces the perceptions, myths and realities that the game brings a terrible annoying noise. So, what can you do about noise? DO NOT DENY IT EXISTS.

So here is what we did:

When we in Phoenix were negotiating which of the 32 city parks (that had tennis courts) would be considered for pickleball (dual play) we had a list of criteria in mind: available parking, condition of the courts, lighting, number of courts, and proximity to residential areas. We immediately removed the objection of noise being an issue, we looked for parks that were a good distance from any residential areas.

We acknowledged it amongst ourselves and let the city know we too were concerned about it…I can tell you that went a long way in acceptance of our final list.

And obviously, USAPA has acknowledged it and equipment manufacturers are developing softer sounding paddles and balls. Plus, there a sound dampening screens that can be utilized where you have existing courts and do not have choices as to where those courts go.

• **Cost concerns (developing pickleball courts or lines)**

In dealing with cities you will find quickly that funds do not exist for development of park infrastructure, “it’s not in our budget”. Those same agencies certainly do not shy away from free, and the one area you can have the most impact in is through community (pickleball community) support and fund raisers. Many communities are funding and raising money for court development, painting lines and court improvement.

The community of Eau Claire Wisconsin negotiated with the city and raised 30,000 to build several courts recently. The same thing happened in Wickenburg Arizona where they have 6 courts with 6 more due to follow. The City of Show Low, population of a few thousand, build 4 pickleball courts with the help of some of the players having raised a couple thousand dollars. It is a sign of good faith.

In Phoenix, we heard the same story, the city had no money, no budget. Then one day we god a call to meet with them, they have money, over 1.5 million dollars, to build 25 courts. They got the money from a state of Arizona tax fund, the end of the fiscal year was approaching and they money had to be used.

**• Confusion of added lines on existing courts**

This too is a myth, that people get confused by having too many lines, especially on an indoor gymnasium and sometimes outdoor where tennis is being played.

For outdoor, technology has helped in the concept of “shadow lines” which are lines that are faintly painted to downplay any confusion from tennis players.

For indoor, gymnasiums often field a multiple of sports, there are lines everywhere.

Pickleball players deal with it and figure it out on the indoor side, for outdoor courts, we did a survey and found most tennis players would not be bothered by it.

As a result, I believe from experience, that this is a concern of public officials, albeit a small one that can be overcome from the statements above.

**• Opening Discussions with Parks and Recreation and other City Officials**

There are probably very few people that do not know what pickleball is. Keep the description simple.

The largest obstacle you may be faced with is budget allocation. This is something that is not readily an obstacle that can be overcome, certainly not soon.

Acknowledge those obstacles and offer other economical solutions by doing your own homework and research.

Make a list of all viable parks in the city, note those that have tennis courts, and narrow down to those that are little used or in need of repair. Chances are a city is more willing to repair and repurpose existing courts for conversion that building new ones from the ground up.

Further note if the parks have ample parking, washrooms, lighting, good fencing and are a good distance away from housing and other businesses that may not welcome the noise.

Neighborhood parks are generally to close to houses and noise/lighting may be an issue.

Instead of a total conversion of existing courts, simple and economical solutions may be dual purpose usage, with lines and heavy-duty portable nets. Light portable nets will be easily bent or broken.

Look at public schools in the area; discover which ones have tennis courts. It is very likely the schools may not teach tennis, so, offering to teach pickleball may be a way to get courts. Public schools are also ‘public’ and the courts can be used when school is not in session.

Every city I have introduced pickleball to love the idea of ambassadors offering free classes to students, they also love that word ‘family’…cities are all about family fun and involvement, and what better game than pickleball.

Use Google Maps to get a birds-eye view of your area/city, know your demographics.

You may have to work with tennis groups to share court space, offer friendly challenges, try to remove potential obstacles.

* **Get Influencers Involved in the Game**

One sure fire way to get influencers involved and help advocate for the game is to have them play. Introduce them to pickleball; get them to play with you as you can team up with them.

Influencers can include schoolteachers, city services groups such as the fire and police department, first responders, your council members, local community leaders, local business owners, etc.

Set up mini tournaments even on makeshift courts and have some competitive fun play such as Police vs Fire, two rival high schools, one restaurant vs another.

Understand that people generally don’t like things because they never tried it.

Focus on pickleball as an amenity that can be enjoyed by all ages, genders, and the entire family.

Offer to teach introductory and beginner classes for free to any church, boys/girls club, youth group, school, etc.

See if you can get advocates to support you from the above groups as those leaders can represent positive influences for the city and elected officials.

* **Cost Factors**

Cost estimates can vary widely, and several things have to be considered:

You probably will be doing one of two things

**New Builds:** (Anywhere from 20K to 80K)

**Conversions of an existing pad** (tennis courts) 5-10K

Examples: (all in the Phoenix, Arizona area)

* A new build just got approved with a 450K budget for 8 courts) (60k per court)
* Another was finished with a 420K for 6 courts 70K per court
* City of Phoenix did 16 courts for 1.2 million, plus refurbished 8 courts on an existing tennis court for 40K
* Tempe is doing 8 courts (bleachers, washrooms, ADA needs, Water and irrigation, lighting for about 680K
* Another tennis rebuild conversion for 6 courts was 60K
* Court lines, for dual/shared play to have 4 courts was 500 dollars for paint and over 600 for nets
* New Court construction in Show Low AZ, included 4 courts, no lights, post tensioning, 10 foot fence with fence capping, seating area and drainage of existing grounds…cost was $230,000 or about $60,000 per court.

So what factors do need to be consider: These will affect the cost and show why there is a large range in cost per court.

For sake of argument, I am assuming the land is already paid for, as that can DRAMATICALLY change the costs.

* Number of courts (more courts will reduce the cost per court Slightly)
* Is the pad poured concrete or post tensioning?
* how thick is the pad...typically 5-6 inches... (depends on the ground and how much pre work is needed)?
* Do you need to move/add irrigation, electrical lines, or drainage?
* Does the land need to be leveled?
* Do you need to adhere to ADA standards?
* Will you be building Adaptive Courts for wheelchair play?
* Will you be adding water fountains, bathroom, or bleachers?
* Will you do individual fencing around each court?
* How high will you need to have the fencing around the perimeter
* Colors, how many (one two or three) plus lines
* Wind Screens
* Paddle Holders
* Maintenance costs
* Lighting (LED or Halogen)
	+ Pros and Cons of new builds
		- New builds usually are built with post tension concrete, which is more expensive but in the long run last longer by many years
		- Repairing cracks on existing builds is not a good idea as those cracks will certainly reappear
		- It is more efficient to start over than do patch work repairs.

I am sure there are more factors, but one great resource for court design is <https://www.sportsbuilders.org/publications/>

The book is 29.95. I highly recommend it.

* **Success Stories**

This document has been used by many individuals and has been attributed for many successful campaigns, among those are:

* 33 new outdoor pickleball only courts in Phoenix, Arizona (all free and open to the public) 24 at Pecos Park (opening in April 2018), 6 at Paseo Park (opening in Fall of 2018) and 3 at Rose Mofford Sports Complex (open now)
* 6 free public pickleball only courts (converted from tennis) in Chandler, Arizona at Arrowhead Meadows Park (opened Feb. 2018)
* 8 public outdoor pickleball courts (new build and free) in Tempe, Arizona at Tempe Sports Complex…2 of which are adaptive courts. Scheduled to open in early fall 2018.
* A 4-court conversion…dual purpose shared with tennis, from two unused tennis courts, at Harelson Park in Tempe, Arizona. Courts are public and free and have heavy duty portable nets. Scheduled to open in April 2018
* 8 courts added at Highland High School in Gilbert, Arizona, shared with tennis courts, with portable nets. Courts are free and open to the public during non-school hours.
* Up to 24 public free outdoor courts in Gilbert, Arizona, part of a new public park project build over the next 3 years, anticipated opening date, 2020
* 4-6 court conversion in Chandler, Arizona at a HOA retirement community, from tennis courts.
* 4-6 court conversion at an HOA community in Phoenix Arizona
* 8 court complex in Maricopa, AZ
* Opening conversations for new outdoor pickleball courts in Glendale, Arizona
* Discussions to start In Feb 2018 on another new project in Gilbert, Arizona
* Discussions to start in Fall of 2018 for additional courts in Chandler, Arizona

For more information or assistance, contact Steve Manolis, Email: esstathios@gmail.com

**APPENDIX:**
**Pickleball Growth (Source SFIA 2019 Pickleball Participation Trends)**

2018

* 3.3 million people have played pickleball at least once per year
* 1.29 Million are classified as core players having played 8 or more times per year
* Male players represent roughly 2/3 of all players
* Growth from 2017 to 2018 was 6.6 among core players (average over 3 years was 7.2) indicating a slight slowing
* 1.1 % of the US Population 6 years and older have played pickleball at least once a year
* Players that are more likely to play are 55+, have an annual income of $75K and are college educated
* There appears to be a trend of male players 6-34 that are more likely to play (they index high)
* Ages 35-54 are less likely to play pickleball
* Pickleball Players also index high in the following sports:
	+ Cardio Workouts
	+ Other racquet sports
	+ Hiking
	+ Walking

If trends continue, by 2023 there will be 4.2 million people having played with 1.5 million core players

In comparison there are 17.8 million people how played tennis in 2018

SFIA also finds that people participate in sports and activities if they do it with a friend or friends.

**Final thoughts:**

There is a growing trend of appeal to the sport of pickleball among grammar school children, but it does taper off by high school. Continued exposure, especially with after school programs may help.

Since it is more likely that people will pick up a new sport if friends are included gives credence to having more recreational/social pickleball events that include communities of people, either geographically, socially, or similar lifestyles.