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Pickleball popularity on the rise at the 'Rink' in Lafayette

By Lou Fancher



Beginner and advanced beginner Pickleball players gathered on April 9 at the Rink in Lafayette. Photo Budd MacKenzie

August 2019, that would allow for the new age friendly activity. "At that time there was not an organized big group of Lafayette Pickleball players," Katayanagi said. "It wasn't until the pandemic, when everyone was looking for more outdoor activities, that (the situation) caused a lot of players to find the rink."

Katayanagi says the sport's popularity has brought new life to the rink, but also unique hurdles to climb. With high demand, competition for rentals, and a continued shortage of fields for group sports comes an increased need for planning, rules, and regulations - especially during the program's largely self-policed drop-in times. Another challenge? The city's recreation program is not subsidized by the General Fund and is considered an enterprise fund in which the programs must pay for themselves through collected fees. As Pickleball became more popular, the need for staff or a contractor to set up and take down the court equipment was increasing. "I worked with local Pickleball enthusiast Budd MacKenzie to organize volunteers to set up and take down the courts," says Katayanagi. "The volunteers also raised funds to purchase durable, portable outdoor nets. The (Lafayette Pickle Ball Club, an informal group founded by MacKenzie) worked with me to reach out to the Senior Services Commission to approve co-sponsorship of the volunteer pilot program that allows for free drop-in play." Volunteers of the club offer free instruction to seniors in coordination with the Senior Services Department.

The Lafayette rink was developed in 2010 with Park Facilities development fees and donations from the Roller Hockey user group. Prior to that, the PTR department set up a temporary rink several times a week in the Community Center parking lot.

The Parks, Trails and Recreation Commission showed forethought and realized that all the spaces at the Community Center, including the rink, needed to be multi-purpose to maximize use. The roller hockey rink was designed with basketball courts and lined for Lacrosse. When it was time to resurface the rink in 2019, the Senior Services Commission collected feedback from the community about the needs of older adults. Pickleball came up as an activity of interest and city staff began researching; meeting with local Pickleball players and learning that a tennis court surface was necessary to allow for appropriate play.

On the city's website, "Pickleball Guidelines" detail the primary rules and advisories regarding public use, along with sport etiquette and instructions for participants. A schedule for play is posted on a bulletin board on the rink shed and notes that the rink is a reservation facility and "you must have a permit for organized play and fee programs. Single family and drop-in individual use may be allowed if the rink is not reserved."

In the city's mid-year budget, Katayanagi said council members approved staff's recommendation to replace existing rink lights with energy efficient LEDs and install a timer that will open up more nighttime drop-ins and extend the available play time during underutilized winter months. An additional Automated External Defibrillator was purchased to support the activity. A Pickle Ball Club volunteer who is a firefighter gave lessons to players about proper use of the device.

Asked about other improvements or expanding the program in response to the surge of interest that continues even as the COVID-19 vaccine alters the sports landscape again, Katayanagi admits time at the rink is at a premium. Presently the program cannot expand. "The rink was already helping with the city's need for fields and now we are in a place where we need fields to open up more time (for field sports) to

Some of the swiftest movement in Lafayette doesn't seem to come from speeding vehicles but from the pace of Pickleball drop-in reservations and class enrollments.

Offered by the city's Parks, Trails and Recreation Department, the Pickleball pilot program at the multi-sport rink adjacent to the Lafayette Community Center currently allows for drop-in play seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. On two weekdays, paid lessons for the general public are available through the city's Recreation Department on two of the courts. The site also serves the sport's aficionados, intermediate players and newcomers to the activity with a rapidly filling roster of classes for people age 12 and up.

Parks, Trails and Recreation Director Jonathan "ACE" Katayanagi, when asked about the court's completion and the next stages in the Pickleball program's history, said staff worked with the PTR Commission and City Council to approve the new surface, which happened in

allow for more Pickleball on the rink. The Pickleball players love the facility so much and would use it all day, but we need to maintain the multi-use of the rink while there is still a shortage of field space in the community."

The rink remains available for other rental uses, according to Katayanagi. Information about renting can be found at www.lovelafayette.org/rink and group programs (larger than one or two families or fee-based rentals) must reserve the rink for a fee.

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