

Planning Commission Report to the Village of Saltaire Board of Trustees

Charge

The Planning Commission (PC) received the following charge from the VOS Board regarding the possibility of offering pickleball in Saltaire:

The Board of Trustees hereby charges and asks the Planning Commission to study the matter and provide some guidance about the feasibility of the Village creating a facility suitable for pickleball in a manner that would in no way interfere with the peace and quiet enjoyment of the community as enshrined in the Village Code and enjoyed by Village residents, or with the necessary operations of the Village, and that conforms with all safety, developmental and environmental rules and regulations governing the Village and Fire Island; and that it further look into and consider factors including a potential location, an estimate of the cost of designing, creating and maintaining such a facility, the potential shared use of an already-existing facility, and the operational aspects of such a facility (such as allocating time slots, oversight, etc.).

The Committee's Findings

Background:

A group of active pickleball players approached the Village to request that it explore a venue for the game. Although the number of players within the Village is unclear, the PC estimates that at least 20 residents would be active players, with the possibility of a greater and growing number given the strong popularity of this sport in New York and nationwide. However, demand for this sport within the Village remains to be determined.

Key Issue:

The overriding concern that the commission as a whole had in the consideration of expanding the Village recreation program to offer pickleball is the impact that the noise generated by the racquets and balls used in this sport would have on neighbors living near a court. There is already a backlash against pickleball in a number of communities due to this factor. This issue has shaped our recommendations.

Set of Recommendations:

Location of a Court:

The PC surveyed locations for a court in consultation with the Village and determined that the only feasible location at this time for pickleball would be to co-locate it on the basketball courts where a play surface of adequate size already exists.

It should be noted that the PC weighed the possibility of building a pickleball court on a Village-owned vacant lot to the north and in front of the maintenance yard. It was concluded that this is not a suitable site for several reasons, including the expense of building a court for a sport of unknown popularity within the Village, lack of a determination on the noise impact on surrounding residences and the consequent need for test program, as well as the safety of having maintenance vehicles moving along the court access point.

Noise Mitigation:

It was brought to the PC's attention by a resident of the Village that alternative equipment has been brought to market that produces a more muffled sound. Furthermore, USA Pickleball, the sport's official body, continues to promote and explore acoustic options including quieter racquets as well as a softer ball of sound-muffling design.

Upon testing a softer variety of pickleball, the PC did determine that it is quieter. Based on this, the commission unanimously recommended that the requirement of having players use quieter equipment as specified by the Village be adopted should the Board decide to go forward with a program.

Secondly, hewing to the Village's noise code and the hours it allows for light residential equipment use (sec. 36-5 A), the PC agreed that pickleball play should be limited accordingly (i.e., in season between 9AM and 5PM on weekdays and 10AM and 4PM on weekends). Further recommendations on hours follow.

Logistics of co-locating on the Basketball Court:

Two things are evident from the ad hoc usage of the basketball courts for pickleball that has emerged in the past year. One, the surface is suitable for pickleball. Two, given the ease of setting up a net and delineating play areas, it is a workable shared location. In fact, its size is such that it could accommodate two pickleball courts simultaneously. However, whether or not the Village chose to test the use of one court only while leaving the other open for impromptu basketball games is another option for it to consider.

More important, the PC had a clear consensus that any pickleball program located at the basketball court should not interfere with other court usage. Play, it believes, should be limited to times when it is not blocked out for Camp, basketball or other existing scheduled activities.

Pilot program recommendation:

In order to gauge the demand and feasibility of a village pickleball program, the PC (with one member dissenting*), recommends that a one-month-long pilot program be introduced this summer for village residents. To reiterate, limiting hours and requiring certain equipment should be built into such a program.

Management of a Pickleball Program:

While the PC did not agree on the best approach to managing a pilot or ongoing pickleball program, the majority believes that having an onsite manager and providing proper equipment would be the best way to administer a program. In this way, the Village could monitor adherence to agreed-upon hours and use of quieter equipment, hold an on-site signup that enables fair usage by village residents, and ensure timely set up and take down of the nets.

This model would require a financial commitment by the Village as follows: Purchase and storage of proper equipment and the cost of an onsite manager. It was suggested by several on the committee that this would ideally be a college student living in the village.

To help offset this expense and to limit participation to village residents as per approved guidelines, it was also suggested that players be required to register for the program at the Village office, sign an agreement regarding usage, and pay a fee (amount TBD).

Additionally, if demand for court time made it too difficult to accommodate the number of players, the allotted time for each game could be shortened from 1 hour to 40 minutes.

Alternative Recommendation:

Should the Village decide that having an onsite manager would be too expensive, burdensome or unnecessary given uncertain demand, an alternate recommendation involving minimal oversight and lower expense was discussed by members of the PC.

This program model would involve collaboration among players and self-management. It would require the use of the quieter equipment, but put the burden on players of purchasing and using the approved equipment, setting up, taking down and storing nets, and playing within the set hours. Court usage could be either on a first come, first serve basis or could be managed using a simple online booking system for sign-up such as is available at minimal expense via the Internet. This approach would by its nature rely more heavily on Saltaire Security to monitor abuse.

Should the Board wish further information on any of the options that the PC presented herein, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Respectfully submitted,
Kathryn Woods, Chair, and Planning Commission members Carol Cappelletti, Lanette Hodge, William Obre, and Carolyn Wise* (dissenting)