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City staff have tried to accommodate the picklers there, resurfacing the courts and painting pickleball lines in light blue to differentiate from the bright white lines that mark the tennis boundaries.

Those city-designated lines have not been enough to hold all of the picklers, so Griffin has taken to chalking out additional "courts" in the facility.

"I chalk out courts and this year we've been able to play 16 people at once, rather than just eight," he said. "We've been averaging 20 people showing up. And we went as high as 28 one day."

Griffin had gone to the city and asked to turn some of the tennis courts into pickleball dedicated courts, but the city "didn't want to go that far, and I understand that position completely," Griffin said. If Griffin really had his druthers, the pickleball courts wouldn't infringe on the tennis courts at all.

"I would like to see, for lack of a better term, a pickleball complex," he said. "Six courts, perhaps, with dedicated courts as opposed to a pickleball court painted inside tennis courts."

The real pie in the sky would be indoor and outdoor courts,

"And with that, I'm just convinced that people would be coming here to play," Griffin said. "We would run a few tournaments. The first time I run a tournament, it will not be the best, but with input from people with knowledge and more practice, we'll run tournaments and tourism dollars will just start coming in."

Griffin, who has already seen pickleball players coming in from Eugene and Reedsport, believed that dedicated courts would bring an influx of cash into the community and help stimulate economic growth.

Sounds like the perfect addition to the region. So what's the plan to get it going?

"I have no idea," Griffin said. "Unfortunately for me, I am an exhorter and I am coach. That is how I was built by the Lord."

He hopes that being a vocal advocate for the sport will attract people that would have knowledge in such things and would be willing to pick up the torch.

But even if or when he does find such people, what would the actual mechanism be for them to

build such a complex?

For that, we went to City of Florence City Manager Erin Reynolds.

"Oh, Erin, the city manager?" Griffin said. "Great person."

"LIMITED PARKS DOLLARS"

"I had heard about the passionate, excited group of pickleballers that showed up to the Lane County Parks Plan," Reynolds said. "I don't think anyone quite anticipated the interest in pickleball, but that does go to show how excited they are and how much they love their sport."

Attending the meeting was city Associate Planner Glenn Sutherland, who visited the pickleball court the morning after the parks meeting to speak with the players. He found some possibilities to help the picklers in the near-term, including adding a few more lines and perhaps giving them a storage space.

"Little things we can do now," Reynolds said.

Reynolds, along with other city employees, had worked with Griffin in the past. He had come to city council meetings and made requests for an indoor facility or, at the very least, to modify the existing tennis courts, which the city did.

Griffin stated that it was a pleasure working with the city. But as far as the big plans for a complex?

"We'd love to be able to say yes to everything, but unfortunately we have very limited parks dollars," Reynolds said. "Typically, we do all of our park projects through grant funding and through community grassroots efforts. The great thing about pickleball is that we have a good grassroots group starting. We unfortunately just have not had the funds to match with that grant funding, and it's one activity versus maybe something that can get people interested on a wider scale in our community."

As of now, the priority is improving Miller Park through a \$500,000 project that will bring a new concession stand, bathroom, better accessibility in trail walking around the park and other improvements to the field.



Rolling Dunes Park, located at the corner of 35th Street and Siano Loop in Florence, has the Siuslaw region's only public tennis courts — marked in white — and pickleball courts — marked in light blue. Sometimes more courts are added in chalk to allow more "picklers" to play.

"Our other park project is adding a new park, a river beach access park on Rhododendron Drive, and those are both significantly funded through grants," Reynolds said.

That's not to say that the future of pickleball is out of the question. Once the new city council is seated after this November's elections, the city will begin goal setting and planning for the next two years going forward.

"Pickleball and a few other requests that are along those lines for parks and quality of life, amenity type requests, will all be considered and put into the equation to see what can be funded and what can get done in the following two years," Reynolds said.

But does that mean a pickleball complex will be on the docket in long-term planning?

"We're hesitant to do one facility specific to one activity and that's all it's for," she said.

It's difficult for any city to fully move forward on a project like a pickleball complex without considering other sports. If it spent \$500,000 on a complex, what about all the other sports out there? Shouldn't they get an investment too?

"We know there's a greater need and desire in the community for a community recreation center, or a parks and rec program that's more robust than what they city already provides," Reynolds said.

But right now, the city is not currently in the process for planning that.

"We're just not there," Reynolds said. "We've quite a few large priority and significant capital projects. We're just looking at it in the context of the community and trying to be sensitive to other large items that are going on the

ballot in the near future."

These include projects like Miller Park, but also larger economic drivers like downtown revitalization.

But if there's no immediate plans now, what do the picklers do as their resources become more and more taxed? They already have 12 people waiting around just to get a game in.

"That's just the tension of what is always there," Reynolds said. "What we want right now, what we can actually do and where we're going in the future."

When it does come time for the city to start entertaining the idea of a recreational center, or a full blown pickleball complex, there's a lot of questions that will need to be answered.

Where would the complex go? What would the architectural design be? What will the complex cost? Are there grants available for such a plan? These are a lot of questions that have to be answered to begin such a project, and as of right now, the current staffing levels can't handle the research it would take to look into such a grand project.

"It's not a lack of wanting to," Reynolds said. "It's a lack of resources and human capacity on the city side for a pretty special interest group project."

And staffing issues aren't just a problem with the City of Florence.

RESOURCES

"With the small number of staff, we're busy," Conrad said in the Parks meeting.

Lane county operates a total of 68 parks, including campgrounds, marinas and water access ramps. They cover a little over 43,000 acres of space. The

staff to take care of this acreage? Just 16, including office staff like Conrad.

"To bring that into perspective, we have six full-time rangers," he said. "They are going out for compliance, looking at annual passes, looking for disturbances on our campgrounds. That's not a lot."

Rangers can spend hours a day just driving between one park to the next, and it's not just maintaining the parks that the rangers have to deal with. They also work

with education, outreach and habitat restoration.

Lane County does all of this with an annual budget of \$3.5 million. To put that in perspective, the City of Eugene alone has \$3 million in its parks budget, including \$1.1 million for site renovations and rehabilitation, \$1 million for community and regional park development and \$750,000 for neighborhood and community parks acquisition.

"We have a lot of work every day," Conrad said. "But it provides a lot of opportunities to do a number of things for a lot of opportunities. We can offer people a number of different experiences throughout the county. That's what I love about our parks system, it's that we can do so much for so many people."

Some of those opportunities laid out in the Lane County Parks Master Plan includes some robust improvements to how the parks are run, including updating the website to make it more user friendly and using apps to connect people to parks with amenities like self-guided tours.

Lane County is also looking to encourage more usage for those with disabilities, pointing out that the parks have few handicapped parking spaces and not much in the way for visually impaired or hardscaped paths for people to go on.

Another issue the park has is outdated signage around the park.

"Some people come into our parks and the trails aren't well marked. Signs have outdated information that isn't organized well," said Lane County Public Works Director Dan Hurley. "We don't want our parks to be stagnant and just expect people to come. They have to be vibrant, where we're adapting to people's interests."

With those improvements in the pipeline, and such limited resources to manage them, focusing on creating a pickleball complex

would not be in the immediate cards.

But Lane County is instituting a mechanism that could help groups like the picklers get their plans in motion.

"One plan I really like is to create a 501(c)(3) umbrella friends' group," Hurley said. "It's a very important tax status for a group to organize so they can be a nonprofit. We can't just give money to a group of individuals without accounting on that. It's hard for a new group to form a nonprofit and there's an expense to it. Our thought is, if we could create an umbrella nonprofit and help to get that going to coordinate new friends' groups or communication between friends' groups."

This potential umbrella group could help small friends' groups get the funding and organization needed to help along projects like a pickleball complex.

Working with well-organized friends' groups is vital for the success of any large-scale project, according to Reynolds.

"[The picklers] need the city and the city needs them," she said. "It really has to be symbiotic and working together through the whole process. So, if they have that energy and the desire, we could work with them and they could fundraise toward a city pickleball park project."

While the city does not have an umbrella project in mind like Lane County does, there is a local organization that can help the picklers, and any other recreational organization that is looking for a home, help realize their goals.

The Siuslaw Vision 2025 project, which is in its fourth year, just finished hosting a statewide conference where communities and cities gathered to talk about growth and how cities are working together to build up regions within the state.

Along the way, Vision representatives gave a step-by-step guideline on how the idea of a pickleball complex could give fruition to a larger recreational complex in the Siuslaw region, the economic importance of such programs how community members can work together to make it all happen.

Read more in Saturday's edition of the Siuslaw News.

The Rolling Dunes pickleball games are held Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 8:30 to 11 a.m., located at 35th Street in Florence. No preregistration required. For more information, visit www.places2play.org/city/florence-oregon.

To read more about the Lane County Parks Master Plan, and to take an online survey about the plan, visit www.lanecounty.org.

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