

Pictona at Holly Hill, the 'mecca' of pickleball, is already looking to expand

Mary Helen Moore The Daytona Beach News-Journal

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Pictona at Holly Hill looks to double number of pickleball courts after a year in business

Rainer and Julie Martens founded Pictona at Holly Hill, which is aiming to break ground in 2021 on construction of 25 additional pickleball courts.

HOLLY HILL — [Pictona at Holly Hill](#) is in a hurry.

After less than a year in business, plans are underway to double the number of pickleball courts and add a championship arena with seating for 1,200, but construction costs are skyrocketing nationwide.

Holly Hill Mayor Chris Via said the city knows it's important to work quickly.

"The cost of construction is increasing 8% per month with no end in sight," Via said. "When we started talking about this a year ago it was expected to be in the \$2 million range. Now it's in the \$4 million range."

Pictona — a portmanteau of the words "pickleball" and "Daytona" — opened July 15, 2020. It's the vision of Ormond Beach residents Rainer and Julie Martens, who spend 40-to-50 hours a week volunteering (and playing) at the club.



The nonprofit built its \$6.3 million facilities in 13 months through a partnership between the city and Martens Charities. The expansion will be similarly funded, with the charity putting in \$3 million and the city expected to contribute \$1 million.

The matter will come back before the Holly Hill City Commission this summer.

"We haven't fully approved it yet but we're heading in that direction," Via said.

It will add 24 new courts, eight of them covered, as well as the arena and an educational center for coaching.

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They've also requested a \$400,000 grant from Volusia ECHO, and will ask permission from the advisory committee August 12 to begin construction before the grant is awarded (instead of waiting for the grant application to cycle through as is customary).



Rainer Martens gives a tour of the Pictona at Holly Hill facility in Holly Hill, Friday, June 11, 2021. *Nigel Cook/News-Journal*

"Each year the ECHO Board grants several extensions to the time required to complete projects," Holly Hill City Manager Joseph Forte wrote the committee in May. "The city is requesting the same courtesy on the front end of the project."

"That process looks like it would take over a year. We want to get started right away," Rainer Martens said.

Martens said the engineers are already at work and will submit their plans to St. Johns River Water Management District for approval shortly, then bid out construction contracts.

"We think we can get through all of that this summer and start construction in September," he said.

Pickleball saw boost during COVID-19 pandemic

Pickleball, often called the "fastest growing sport in America," got its start in 1965 with an old badminton net, a set of ping pong paddles and a perforated plastic ball, according to the USA Pickleball Association. A rulebook was published in 1984 and the game surged in popularity in the mid 2010s.

"A lot of people who have been bitten by this pickleball bug would like to see this become an Olympic sport eventually, and I think that has good possibilities," Martens said. "This sport is known as being an old person sport, which is rapidly changing as people of all ages discover the fun of playing this game."



Pickleball proved a popular activity during the coronavirus pandemic. The USAPA reported an estimated 4.2 million people played pickleball in 2020, an increase of 700,000 from the previous year.

As of June 1, Pictona had 730 members and clocked more than 41,000 visits in its first 10½ months. Martens said they had predicted 300 to 400 members would enroll in the first year.

"To be sitting at 730 in less than a year is just terrific," he said. "We've had individuals tell us they were feeling locked up during COVID-19 and this was their way to get out and socialize."

But it wasn't without its challenges. Martens said low travel, especially from Canada, likely stifled their growth.

"We required everyone to wear a mask initially except when they were playing. Nobody liked that. We didn't like having to administer it and play mask cop," Martens reflected.

Membership costs \$360 a year or \$36 per month, though there are family and youth discounts. Day passes run \$12. All the prices reflect a recent 20% increase over the 2020 rates.



Pictona at Holly Hill in Holly Hill, Friday, June 11, 2021. *Nigel Cook/News-Journal*

Pictona employs five full-time and 11 part-time staffers, and has lots more volunteers.

Sinny Richardson, 57, teaches the free Pickleball 101 course at Pictona, where she's coached players as young as 14 and as old as 84. As of June 1, nearly 900 people had taken the introductory class.

"It's the only sport besides skiing and snowboarding that you can do with all family members," she said.

The courts at Pictona are layers of crushed rock and asphalt painted blue and striped in white.

"It's a little softer on the joints than playing on concrete," Martens said.

Richardson moved to Daytona Beach Shores from Colorado during the pandemic. Her works sites there closed and her dad lives here, so it just made sense.

"This is it. This is the mecca. They built the mecca," she said of Pictona. "Rainer and Julie's vision is just something special."

Covered courts and community

The courts are busiest in the evenings and on weekends. There's 24 today, all lighted for play after dusk, eight of them covered and outfitted with windscreens.

"This is a big plus, having covered courts this time of year," Martens said. "We put (the roof) in for the rain, but really it's most useful for the sun."

The steel alone for the roof cost \$327,000. The same amount today has jumped in price to \$600,000.

Paul Connifey, 54, of Daytona Beach Shores, has been playing at Pictona since it opened. The roof won him over.



Pictona at Holly Hill in Holly Hill, Friday, June 11, 2021. Nigel Cook/News-Journal

"It's cooler under here and you can play longer and your shoes will last longer," said Connifey, who was wearing long sleeves to limit his sun exposure even under the covered courts.

Connifey was on his 872nd consecutive day of playing pickleball when he was interviewed in mid-June.

"The community is a lot of why people come to this place. A lot of people are kind of addicted to it. I probably am," he said.

Elijah White, of South Daytona, plays five or six days a week at Pictona. The 21-year-old said it's a great way to network and form relationships.

"I'm a fanatic, so I hopped on it right away," White said. "It's great. I've never met one mean person playing pickleball."



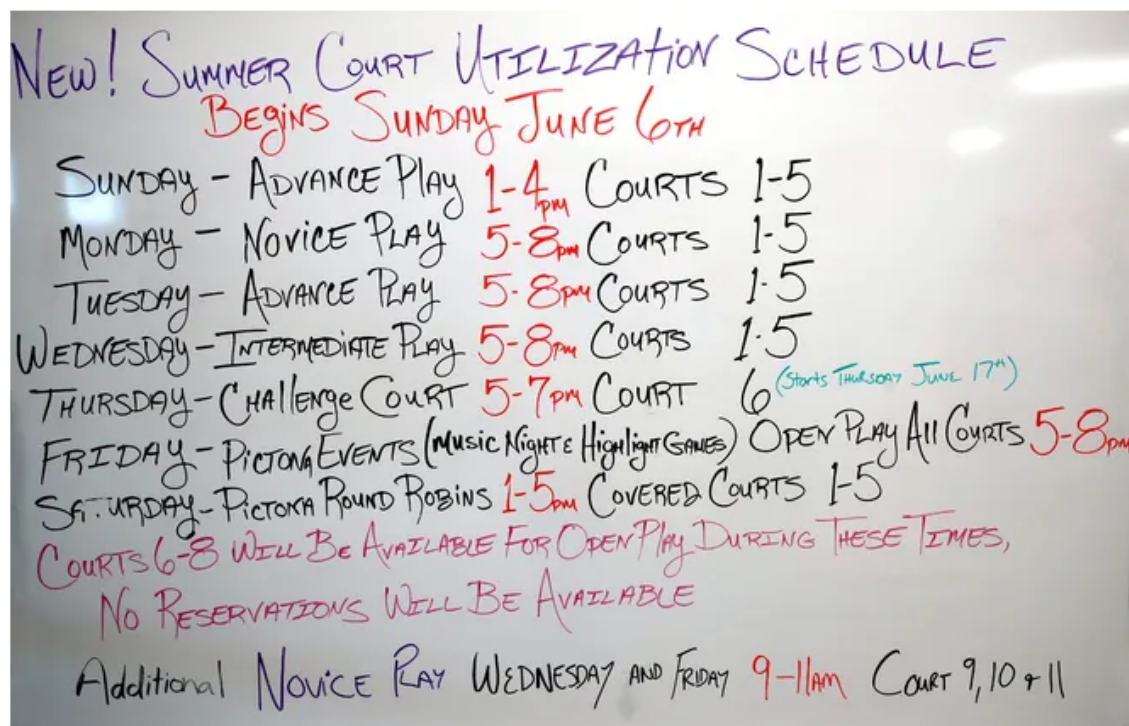
Shirley Dillard, 61, of Daytona Beach, joined in September. She, too, comes out nearly every day.

"Everybody's friendly and everybody loves to play. It's awesome. People just invite you in," Dillard said. "People are always coming from out of town telling us how nice the facilities are."

Pickleball is typically played in doubles. Because of Pictona's volume of courts and steady stream of players, there's always a game to jump in, said New Smyrna Beach Mayor Russ Owen, who's been a member since August.

"To me, Pictona is the best place to catch competitive matchups after hours. You can always find a good game at Pictona. That's the beauty of it," Owen said. "I felt at home from the minute I walked in. Never felt intimidated, never felt out of place. That's what I love about this sport."

With games lasting only 15 minutes or so, and players staying in close proximity with one another, pickleball is a highly social game



Pictona at Holly Hill in Holly Hill, Friday, June 11, 2021. Nigel Cook/News-Journal

"That's kind of the character of this sport. You'll hear that all over the country," Martens said. "You can go down there and put your paddle in the rack and just play with whoever. Men, women, old, young — it's inevitable that you get to talking and get to know each other."

"It's every walk of life. You meet the most interesting people," Richardson added.

A whole lot more than pickleball

The original facility was financed largely by the Martens, who contributed more than \$4 million. The city of Holly Hill put up \$1.2 million, Volusia County contributed a \$400,000 ECHO grant, and sponsorships and donations added another \$50,000.

There's a plethora of games free and open to the public, since taxpayer money helped fund the venture: ping pong, shuffleboard, croquet, cornhole, bocce ball and horseshoes. The Senior Activity Center puts on free classes, from line dancing to Pilates.

You can even garden, with plots going for \$20 a season. Schoolchildren maintain their own plants, and Pictona itself grows some greens it uses in the restaurant.



A group of girl scouts get croquet instruction at Pictona at Holly Hill facility in Holly Hill, Friday, June 11, 2021. *Nigel Cook/News-Journal*

The vision is simply to encourage healthy hobbies for people of all ages.

"One of our missions is to get people to be physically active," Martens said.

There's also a player's store, restaurant and locker rooms equipped with showers on-site.

"One of the reasons we put them in is people come before or after work," Martens noted.

The restaurant is aptly named The Kitchen — the part of the pickleball court closest to the net goes by the same name.

Its biggest seller? Beer, with pitchers running \$9 to \$13.

The arena envisioned as part of the expansion will seat 1,200 and convert to a stage for performances.

"I know the city's excited about having a place in Holly Hill that we can share for entertainment opportunities," Martens said.

Via, Holly Hill's mayor, said they were thrilled with Pictona's success so far and the arena will be an excellent amenity for residents. He said he hoped to do concerts there when construction's complete.

"It's exceeded our expectations very, very quickly and we couldn't be any more happy," Via said.

Martens said he's heard real estate is picking up in the area.

"I know of at least five stories where people have picked a home in the city because they want to be close to Pictona," he recalled.

Via said they want the city to play host to larger tournaments, especially as the sport grows its foothold on TV.

"By doing this, we'll have more of an opportunity to bring in a nationwide audience," Via said. "Not only does it serve our citizens of Holly Hill, but it serves many, many people across Volusia County as well."

Disclosure: The News-Journal's Moore is a pickleball player and member of Pictona at Holly Hill.