

Pickleball paradise

Pictona puts Holly Hill on map as national destination; expansion will add to prominence

Clayton Park

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HOLLY HILL – Pictona is not only becoming a regional draw for pickleball players, it's also putting the tiny city of Holly Hill on the map nationally for enthusiasts of the fast-growing sport.

And an upcoming \$4 million expansion project could make the facility one of the largest of its kind in the country.

The 24-court complex that opened a year ago hosted

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“Pictona is definitely becoming known ... among pickleball enthusiasts.”

Laura Gainor

Director of media relations for USA Pickleball



Pickleball player Richard Lambert returns a shot Wednesday at Pictona at Holly Hill. DAVID TUCKER/NEWS JOURNAL



Holly Hill's Pictona complex was the site of the International Federation of Pickleball's Bainbridge Cup tournament in April. PICTONA.ORG

Pickleball

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an International Federation of Pickleball tournament in April that drew 480 players from throughout the United States as well as a handful of other countries including the United Kingdom, India and Costa Rica.

“Pictona is definitely becoming known around the United States among pickleball enthusiasts,” said Laura Gainor, director of media relations for USA Pickleball, the national governing body for the sport.

The growing reputation of the Pictona complex at 1060 Ridgewood Ave. is also turning the four-square-mile city of Holly Hill into a household name among fans of the sport.

Al Balloqui, owner along with his wife Mary, of the nearby River Lily Inn, said their bed-and-breakfast at 558 Riverside Drive has had several guests in town specifically to play pickleball at Pictona.

“One woman has come twice, if not three times, from North Carolina,” said Balloqui. “We've also had a family come down from Georgia because the daughter was playing at a tournament there.”

The founders of Pictona hope to break ground on the \$4 million expansion project this fall.

The project would increase the number of pickleball courts from 24 to 49, including a “championship court” that would be surrounded by a covered 1,200-seat stadium. Five of the additional courts would be covered.

The expansion project would also add a 5,000-square-foot “education” building that would include classrooms, office space, restrooms, a concession area, and storage space.

“I want to make this THE education center for pickleball in the United States and the world,” Rainer Martens told a breakfast gathering of the Holly Hill Chamber of Commerce on Tuesday.

Martens also announced that negotiations are underway to host “one of the largest major national tournaments here in December 2022.”

“We hope to break ground (on the expansion) this September and complete the project next September,” he said.

Martens said he and his wife Julie envision bringing people from all over the world to Pictona where they can learn how to play the sport as well as how to organize pickleball tournaments in their own countries.

Pictona already offers free one-hour “Pickleball 101” courses twice a week: Tuesdays, beginning at 1 p.m., and Thursdays at 5 p.m.

Adding the covered stadium would allow Pictona to host live music performances as well as other special events such as arts and craft shows, corporate events, graduation ceremonies and weddings, said Martens.

The Kitchen, the on-site restaurant at Pictona, is open to the general public seven days a week.

Couple promotes physical fitness

Martens and his wife Julie, through their Martens Charities, personally contributed more than \$4 million of the \$6.3 million needed to build the current 24-court Pictona complex at the city's Hollyland Park last year.

The initial phase included eight covered courts as well as a 10,000-squarefoot building that includes the restaurant, a members-only clubhouse as well as an open-to-the-public senior activities center. The complex also offers outdoor courts for croquet, bocce ball, horseshoes and shuffleboard, as well as a community garden.

Holly Hill owns the Pictona complex which is run by the Martens and the Pictona at Holly Hill Pickleball Club as a not-for-profit venture. The city contributed \$1 million towards the initial phase.

The Pictona club in its first year of operation signed up 740 members who pay \$360 a year for individual memberships or \$600 a year for families of up to five. Memberships can also be purchased on a monthly basis for \$36 per person. Individuals can also buy a daily pass for \$12. The clubhouse includes men's and women's shower facilities and locker rooms, a pickleball pro shop and a game room equipped with several ping-pong tables.

Pictona employs 20 workers led by General Manager Judy Ginn. Expanding the facility is expected to result in creating more jobs.

The Martens are the retired former owners of a publishing company in Illinois that specialized in books on coaching and sports how-to guides. The couple said they see Pictona as a continuation of their lifelong mission to promote physical fitness and healthy living.

For the "Pictona 2" expansion, the Martens have agreed to donate another \$3 million, with the city contributing another \$1 million in Community Redevelopment Area funds. The Martens and Holly Hill also plan to apply for an ECHO grant from Volusia County.

'This is a fantastic project'

County Council member Heather Post told the chamber gathering that ECHO grants are supposed to be for new projects, not ones already underway. She nevertheless voiced her optimism that the Council might be willing to make an exception for the Pictona expansion.

Post said the ECHO committee is recommending that the County Council approve a grant for the Pictona 2 project and that the grant request be increased from \$400,000 to \$600,000.

"Thank you for all you're doing. this is a fantastic project," she told the Martens as she led the audience in giving the Ormond Beach couple a round of applause.

Rainer Martens said the ECHO grant would provide the expansion project with a financial cushion to absorb potential construction cost overruns as well as possibly adding a walking/jogging/ bicycle path.

The expansion project will proceed regardless of what gets decided regarding the ECHO grant application, he said.

"We really are pushing forward," said Rainer Martens. "We see a window of opportunity to become a national educational and training center for the sport and want to move expeditiously."

Holly Hill City Manager Joe Forte said he considers Pictona one of the greatest projects he has been involved in. "Holly Hill is being put on the map nationally among pickleball enthusiasts," he said. "We have people

calling the Holly Hill Chamber asking for information about homes in the area because they want to relocate near Pictona.”

Nation's fastest-growing sport

Pickleball is the fastest-growing sport in the nation, according to Laura Gainor, the Ponte Vedra-based spokeswoman for USA Pickleball. More than 4 million people now play pickleball nationally and is played in more than 50 countries. “Our goal for pickleball is to make it an Olympic sport,” said Gainor.

The sport's appeal includes how easy it is to learn, yet take a lifetime to master, said Julie Martens. Pickleball is also less stressful on the joints than other racquet sports, which has made it especially popular among older adults. The Martens said they want to encourage more young people to pick up the sport as well.

Pickleball is also a sport that encourages social interaction. “This is a happy place,” said Julie Martens. “People have found and developed new friendships. There are romances that have started here as well.”

How pickleball began

The sport was invented in 1965 on Bainbridge Island, near Seattle, Washington, by three families whose children were looking for something new to do. One of the parents handed the kids some ping-pong paddles and a perforated plastic ball and suggested they hit it around on the backyard badminton court of one of the family's homes.

The parents soon joined the kids in playing the new game, adding new rules as they went along.

Kate McCallum, whose late father Barney created the first official pickleball paddles and compiled the first rulebook for the sport, is a member of Pictona.

A small display of photos of McCallum and some of the original pickleball players can be seen on the wall inside the entrance to Pictona.

Pictona has impact on economy

The impact that Pictona is making include more customers for Holly Hill businesses, said Robin Hanger, who owns The Car Shop auto repair garage and Best Price Trailers dealership down the street from Pictona.

“I've gotten business off it (Pictona) at my auto repair business,” said Hanger, who added that it also has helped Simply Gina's, the standalone restaurant he is the landlord of, at 841 Ridgewood Ave.

Hanger at the Holly Hill Chamber of Commerce's breakfast meeting on Tuesday announced plans to develop a recreational vehicle park to accommodate the increase in visitors to the area who come in their RV.

“If it wasn't for Pictona, I wouldn't dream of doing it,” he said, referring to his plans to build the Holly Hill RV Resort at 490 Flomich St., which he said will be able to accommodate up to 110 RVs and will include a clubhouse and pool. All told, Hanger said he expects to invest as much as \$8 million on his project, which should also benefit from being next to Riveria Country Club golf course.

“I'd like to break ground in either January or February,” said Hanger.

Julie Martens in the presentation she and her husband made to the Holly Hill Chamber said Pictona could generate as much as \$40 million in economic impact to the local economy, based on the formula used by the National Recreation & Park Association.

Forte said Hanger's ambitious plan to develop the Holly Hill RV Resort is proof of that.

“Robin wouldn't be doing it if it weren't for pickleball,” Forte said. “Pictona is paying off in several ways: the increased activity and the increased interest in Holly Hill. As it expands, I think it's going to bring even more people to Holly Hill, which is exactly what we need.”

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