

NEWS

Pictona founders to retire. How they put Daytona area on the map for pickleball fans

**Clayton Park**

Daytona Beach News-Journal

Published 5:27 a.m. ET March 21, 2024 | Updated 4:15 p.m. ET March 21, 2024



When Rainer and Julie Martens announced plans in 2018 to donate several million dollars to build a [world-class pickleball complex in Holly Hill](#), they promised to oversee operations for two years to get it established.

The Ormond Beach couple are finally stepping down from their respective roles at Pictona at the end of December. They wound up devoting six years and more than \$7 million of their own money to fulfill their dream of creating a mecca for enthusiasts of one of the nation's fastest-growing sports.

In doing so, they have also helped put the small four-square-mile city of [Holly Hill on the map](#) as a tourist destination.

Pictona, which [opened in July 2020](#), has seen its membership ranks grow to more than 1,400 people. Some come from as far away as Jacksonville and the east side of Orlando to play at the facility's 49 outdoor and covered courts.

The complex also hosts tournaments throughout the year, including some broadcast to television viewers nationally.



Pictona's founders and major financial backers Rainer and Julie Martens stand inside the covered courts area at the pickleball complex in Holly Hill on June 24, 2020, three weeks before opening day. The couple recently announced their decision to step aside from their respective roles in running the 49-court facility at the end of 2024. Rainer has been serving as CEO. Julie has been director of player shops and an "advisor to the CEO." *Clayton Park/News-Journal*

Search is underway to find a new Pictona CEO

Rainer, 81, has been serving as CEO of the not-for-profit Pictona at Holly Hill Inc. organization that runs the complex. Julie, 74, has been serving as player shops director and "official advisor to the CEO."

A search is underway to find a new CEO, confirmed Andy Melville, president of the board for Pictona at Holly Hill. Melville declined to comment on the Martens' decision until he could speak with them first.

The Martens, who are on vacation, did not respond to requests for comment. Holly Hill City Manager Joe Forte said he has been told the couple might be away for several weeks.

The couple's decision was announced in the latest edition of the weekly newsletter sent out to Pictona members.

The Martens initially informed the City and the Pictona board of their decision before sharing it with members of the pickleball club, confirmed Forte.

'It's been a wonderful journey'

"Since 2018 Julie and I have devoted ourselves to developing Pictona," Rainer Martens is quoted as saying in the March 18-24, 2024, edition of the Pickleball Paradise! Pictona News. "It's been a wonderful journey. We have a great team working at Pictona and with a new CEO expect to see Pictona continue to be one of the best pickleball clubs in the world."

Julie Martens added, "The people we've met and the opportunities we've experienced while at the helm have been terrific. We plan to continue being members of Pictona and getting to play a lot more pickleball!"



The monument sign for the Pictona pickleball complex at 1060 Ridgewood Ave. in Holly Hill advertises its first-ever pickleball tournament, which was held Oct. 23-26, 2020, just a little over three months after the then-24-court complex opened. Pictona expanded to 49 courts in 2022. *Clayton Park/News-Journal*

It was all part of their original plan

The Martens told The Daytona Beach News-Journal in an interview in 2018 that their plan was to oversee Pictona's first two years of operation, drawing from their experience as long-time owners of a successful business in Illinois.

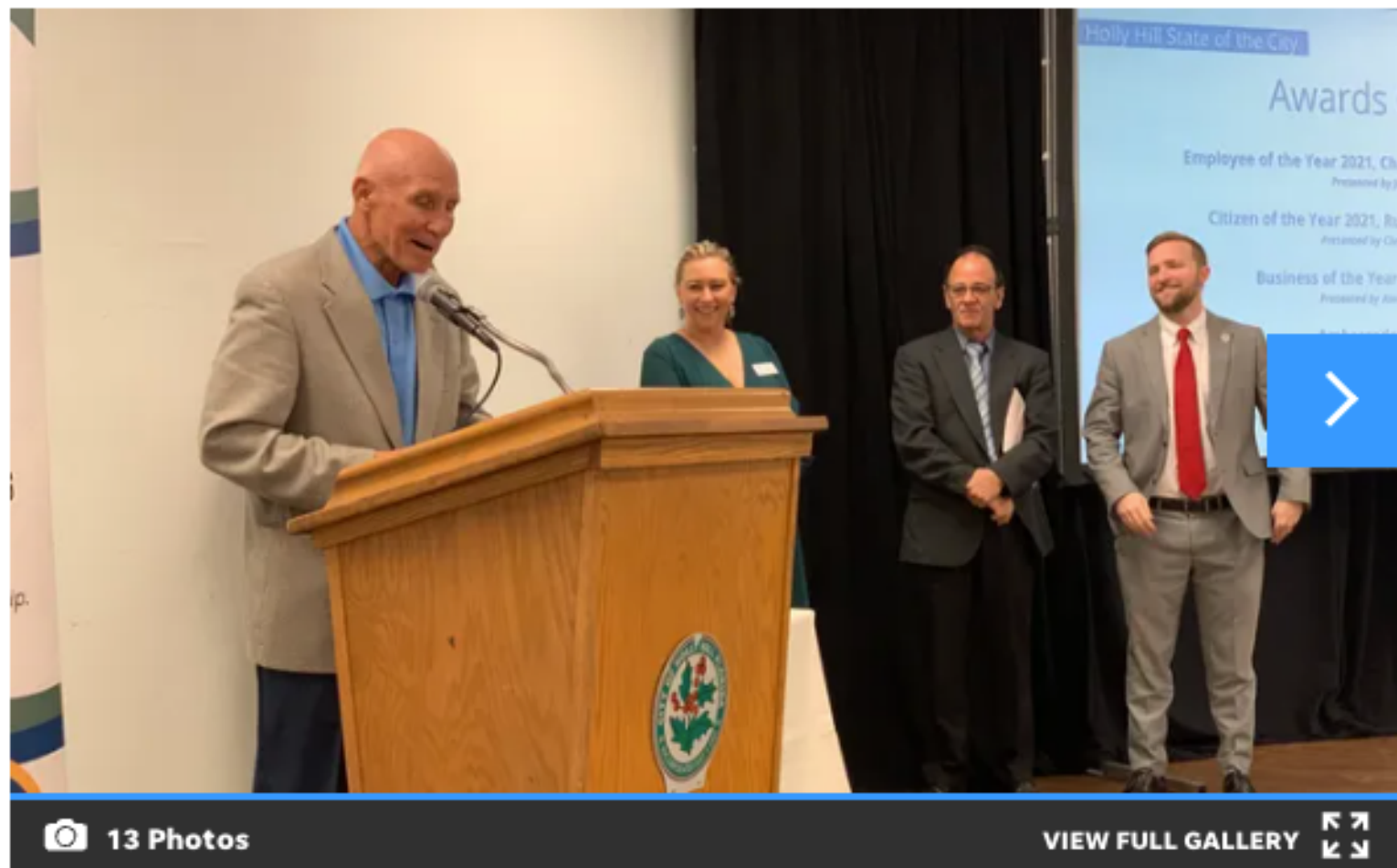
The couple said they then intended to turn over running the pickleball complex to the Pictona at Holly Hill board.

Forte said the Martens' decision to step down was not a surprise.

"He (Rainer Martens) has actually stayed longer than we all thought," Forte told The News-Journal.



A referee oversees a pickleball match during the Pictona Fall Vintage Tournament on one of the new complex's covered courts on Oct. 23, 2020. It was the facility's first-ever tournament. Pictona's founders, Rainier and Julie Martens, recently announced their decision to step aside from their respective roles as CEO and player shops director at the end of 2024. Pictona opened in July 2020. *Clayton Park/News-Journal*



SEE: Founders of Holly Hill's Pictona pickleball complex to retire

Images of the Pictona pickleball complex in Holly Hill and the local couple who founded it.

Who are the Martens?

Rainier Martens, 81, is a retired sports psychologist whose clients included members of the U.S. Olympic Ski Team at the 1984 Winter Games in Sarajevo.

As a kinesiology professor at the University of Illinois, Martens and his late first wife Marilyn in 1974 founded Human Kinetics, a company that specialized in publishing books related to physical activity. They included how-to guides as well as books on exercise science, sports medicine, kinesiology, and coaching.

Martens and Julie, whom he married in 1993 following the death of his first wife, sold Human Kinetics to their employees in 2005. They have been full-time Ormond Beach residents ever since.

Julie Martens took up pickleball and started competing in tournaments.

Rainer Martens, who previously played in senior softball leagues, became a self-described "pickleball addict" like his wife after taking photos at tournaments Julie completed in.

What is pickleball?

Invented in 1965 on Bainbridge Island near Seattle, Washington, pickleball is a sport that involves a paddle and a perforated plastic ball, played on a hard-surface badminton-sized court.

Pickleball has been described as a cross between tennis, badminton and table tennis.

Played by all ages, the sport has become hugely popular in recent years, especially among those age 55 and older, because it is easy to learn and encourages social interaction.

It can also be less physically taxing on the joints than tennis, although injuries can still occur, as PGA Senior Tour golfer [Bernhard Langer](#) recently discovered.

Kate McCallum, a [daughter of one of pickleball's inventors](#), lives part of the year in Ormond Beach and is a member of Pictona.

"It's great," she said when contacted on Tuesday. "My sister visited last week from Seattle and was impressed with Pictona. She loved it."

How much have the Martens donated to Pictona?

An exact dollar amount is unknown, but this much is certain: it's a lot.

The couple initially offered to donate \$3 million, while asking the City of Holly Hilly to contribute \$1 million, to convert the under-utilized city-owned 25-acre Hollyland Park into an attraction that could draw pickleball enthusiasts both from throughout the region as well as the rest of the country.

The total cost of the 24-court first phase of Pictona wound up being \$6.3 million. The City wound up contributing \$1.3 million, with another \$400,000 coming from an ECHO grant from Volusia County, and individual donors kicking in \$100,000. The Martens donated \$4.3 million.

In 2022, the Martens contributed another \$3 million to expand Pictona, with the City kicking in another \$1 million. The county provided another ECHO grant, this time to the tune of \$2.5 million.

Holly Hill recognized the couple for making a positive impact by presenting them with a "Corporate Citizen of the Year" award in January 2022.

Who owns Pictona?

The City of Holly Hill owns the land where Pictona sits as well as its buildings and physical assets. The City has contracted with Pictona of Holly Hill to run the facility.

The complex includes facilities for other recreational sports including table tennis, cornhole, croquet, and a putting green.

Amenities include men's and women's locker rooms and shower facilities, an on-site open-to-the-public restaurant called The Kitchen, the Aetna Gardens at Pictona, the Florida Health Care Plans Games Room, two player shops, and the FHCP Activity & Education Center. The latter is open to both the community as well as Pictona members. It offers free indoor exercise classes, educational programs, and outdoor recreational courts.

Living up to its promise

Pictona has been widely praised by pickleball enthusiasts from throughout the country and beyond. The complex has already hosted several regional, national and

Earlier this year, Pictona hosted the four-day [AARP Champions Cup Pickleball Tournament](#) which drew 500 professional and amateur players from 38 states including former professional tennis legend Ivan Lendl, 63.

The complex this past weekend hosted the Subaru at Daytona Challenge at Pictona Tournament.

Next up, will be a Money Ball Tour pickleball tournament on March 30, followed by the MetroHealth Super Seniors Tournament May 3-5, and Aetna Elite Team Invitational Tournament on May 11. Pictona will also host Sundown Showdown Team Tournament events on June 22, July 20 and Aug. 17.

Making a positive impact

Holly Hill businessman Robin Hanger said the pickleball complex has benefitted his The Car Shop auto repair business down the street.

"My business has seen an uptick in customers," he said. "They (the Martens) have been most instrumental in the growth of Holly Hill."

Hanger briefly partnered with the Martens in trying to develop a nearby RV Park that could cater to visiting pickleball players. Hanger wound up selling the 25-acre former Bishops Dairy property at 490 Flomich St. last fall to Julie Mericle Smith of DeLand and Larry Kaylor of Colorado. The two are expected to break ground this year on the Lake Belle RV Resort project.

Hanger credits Pictona for helping make the project possible, not only by drawing pickleball enthusiasts, but also real estate investors such as Smith and Kaylor.

"Would I say that the Martens helped put Holly Hill on the map? Definitely," he said.