

On December 13th the Association was able to make a presentation to Calvin Ball. The speech (see below) received a perfunctory, "Yes we hear you." I was left with the impression it had very little impact. To be fair, our presentation followed the requests from the Food Bank and a homeless shelter asking for more funding due to the rise of food insecurity and homelessness in Howard County.

As a follow-up to this presentation, The Board intends to send a letter to Calvin Ball outlining the contributions to Howard County residents from our Association (including the Food Bank and Grassroots).

In addition, we will point out the Healthy Howard initiative and how Pickleball contributes to that effort.

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Good Evening, My name is Joanne Griesser, and I am President of the Howard County Pickleball Association.

The Howard County Pickleball Association has been active for over 5 years. We started our organization in a tiny conference room over the YMCA gym. There were about 20 of us back then, and we had two simple goals in mind, play and promote Pickleball.

Our small group organized. We elected board members; I was the first Secretary and the last position on the board to be filled.

We wanted to start organizing weekly sessions but we didn't have any courts so we drew lines on tennis courts with chalk. It was not ideal but it worked. Each time we went to play, we had to measure each court and set up our nets. It took time, but we were a determined group.

We identified two underutilized tennis courts behind the Ice Rink in Columbia. A few of our board members convinced CA to paint court lines there. You can fit two pickleball courts on one tennis court. The association set a time on Saturday morning from 9-11. Each week attendance grew until we had 16 people playing and 20 waiting to get on the next open court.

There were a few Saturdays when two tennis players would come and use one of these precious courts. Two people using one tennis court will knock off two pickleball courts and sideline eight players. They had two people playing while we had 25 -30 people waiting. When they would stop playing to rest for 15-20 minutes, we approach them nicely, and asked to use the courts, but they refused. It was very hard to watch them sitting on one tennis court, two empty pickleball courts, when we had people wanting to use the only place we had to play.

Time marched on and the tenacious board members kept asking CA and Recreation and Parks for more courts. Finally they modified a few more tennis courts for dual purpose. Locust Park and Vantage were a couple of spots. Then by a wonderful mistake, handball courts were torn down and two permanent courts were built at Atholton. These courts are always busy. I remember one summer evening. I waited for my turn over an hour before I finally gave up and went home. It got dark.

Our membership has grown from that first meeting of 20 people to over 600 active members. 600. We are adding new members every week. Not all players are members. Ad hoc groups are popping up all over the county and hosting play sessions. I belong to an Ad Hoc Sunday Morning group of almost 60 people. 10-12 Sunday morning. We have 8 courts setup and we still have people waiting.

Pickleball is mainstream. It has grown from a few players drawing lines on tennis courts to being showcased on network TV shows like Good Morning America. And full coverage on cable of the World Pickleball Championship games, yes there are world champions, (the winners this year are from Maryland!). We are not a passing fad like pet rocks and the hula hoops. We are here to stay. It is the fastest growing sport in the United States today.

This sport is not just for retirees although we have members in their 80's that beat me regularly! The majority of our Sunday group are people under 40s, and they bring their teen and twenty year old kids. Young people are coming on the courts. I have been beaten by 18 year olds too! To help support the youth programs, our organization donates equipment to schools. We have volunteers that are willing to host after school programs if Howard County had the facilities.

This sport encourages comradery and good sportsmanship. When I lose a point because my opponent made a great shot. I say "Great shot" and not between clenched teeth. I really mean it.

Unfortunately, Howard County, the seventh richest county in the US, has not kept up with the growing demand for courts and facilities. We only have 2 dedicated courts in our county. Two! We do not have any dedicated covered or indoor facilities. Nothing with lights for night play. We get a few hours a week in a couple of gyms, and very little time in the evenings for the folks that are working. Once the snow gets too deep to clear a court, we have very few places to play. You will see us clearing courts with snow shovels, in our ski hats and woolen gloves trying to hit a ball that doesn't bounce because it's too cold. But we are still out there.

This is a great sport and a wonderful way of getting exercise, young or old. We are respectfully requesting that you consider funding for permanent courts in places like Blandair, Western Regional and Atholton Parks, more dual use courts in Centennial, Savage and Blandair parks, and a dedicated indoor or lighted covered facility that can be utilized at night and during inclement weather.

We hope you will consider our request and invite us into more in-depth discussions about our needs. And as always, we would welcome you on the court for a game or two. Thank you for your time.