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TOPICAL

ALERT

Pickleball powers forward with construction of new courts at Buhl Park

By DAVID L. DYE Herald Staff Writer Aug 24, 2019 Updated Aug 25, 2019



HERMITAGE — After a delay caused by higher-than-expected costs, area pickleball players are helping to build their own court of dreams.

Crews have begun to strip and to level the ground near the Buhl Park driving range's First Tee building to make way for the courts, which could be open by Oct. 15, said Ryan Voisey, Buhl Park director of operations.

“As long as everything goes according to plan, we would definitely plan on doing an opening ceremony,” Voisey said.

Park officials planned to begin work on the courts in late April, at an estimated cost of \$230,000. Grants of \$106,000 from the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and \$13,000 from Visit MercerCountyPA and a private donation of \$96,000 were supposed to cover most of the cost.

However, progress on the new courts stalled when bids for the project were higher than expected, with the lowest bid at about \$391,000.

Buhl Park Interim Executive Director Linda Evans said park staff worked with Sharon-based HHSDR Architects/Engineers and contractor Sharon Paving and Construction to help get the project's cost lowered to \$321,505.

“Sharon Paving was really accommodating when it came to helping us get the cost to an affordable amount,” Evans said.

When additional grant funds became available, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources notified park officials that they should apply, said Mary Lynn Reid, the park's development director. If the application is approved, the initial \$106,000 grant will include an additional \$54,000.

"If DCNR comes through for us, then we'll be completely covered," Reid said.

And even more assistance came from an unlikely source — the pickleball players themselves.

Shenango Valley Pickleball Players Association member Rick Veccia said the group started fundraising after Buhl Park's annual State of the Park forum in January, when park officials announced the project and the associated costs.

The association raised \$30,000 for the project, which included local donations and contributions from the players themselves.

"We went around trying to get donations and most of the players kicked in some money, too. And in two months we had a lot of very generous people and some anonymous donors who helped out a lot," Veccia said.

The group was originally called the Shenango Valley Parking Lot Pickleball Players because they played at Hermitage's softball complex on North Darby Road. More recently, the players have shared the Sue McLaughlin Buhl Park Tennis Court.

Veccia said the growing number of pickleball players proves the need for a court, while Evans thanked the group for its willingness to help contribute to the project.

"The community has really rallied around this project, and the pickleball players in our area have been phenomenal in their efforts," the park's interim executive director said.

Starting at 8 a.m. Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings in Buhl Park, with additional playing time at 6 p.m. Mondays and Fridays, the association has grown from about 12 to 18 people last year to 60 or 70 people this year. When people stop by, Veccia said members invite them to take up the sport.

"Almost everybody that we've ever had try out pickleball with us ends up coming back," he said.

The association will hold its first-ever Pickle in the Park tournament to raise money for the court project. The tournament begins at 9 a.m. Sunday at the tennis courts, with categories for men, women and mixed teams, said Bill McCullough, another association member.

The tournament will include 78 players and is full. It will feature teams from Meadville, Grove City and Stoneboro in Pennsylvania and Warren and Cortland in Ohio, and is expected to raise between \$2,000 and \$3,000.

“When we started organizing this, we thought, ‘If we can get 36 teams, then that would be great,’ but we started getting so many phone calls and emails from people that we had to close the registration because we were getting too many,” McCullough said.

Concessions will be available during the event, while a pair of GAMMA pickleball paddles, each valued at more than \$100, were donated by a local company representative. Pickleball Central out of Washington donated enough bags for all the participants, while McCullough said local businesses donated items to fill each of the goodie bags.

“They gave us pens, water mugs, hand sanitizers, all kinds of different things that people will get,” McCullough said.

Participants will also receive a free T-shirt, which McCullough said features names of a variety of local sponsors.

“It’s amazing the support that the community gave to us,” he said. “And it’s also one of the most popular things about these tournaments. Everyone wants a T-shirt.”

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This story has been updated to correct the sate of teh tournament to Sunday, Aug. 25.

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