

Denver suburb lifts ban on new outdoor pickleball courts, but will new rules squelch noise impacts?

Centennial won't allow outdoor courts within 250 feet of a residential property line



Members of the Homestead in the Willows neighborhood gathered at tennis courts they hoped to turn into pickleball courts this spring, on April 5, 2023, in Centennial. On Tuesday, city leaders passed a new set of rules to ensure noise from the game does not disturb homeowners. (Photo by RJ Sangosti/The Denver Post)



By **JOHN AGUILAR** | jaguilar@denverpost.com | The Denver Post

PUBLISHED: September 20, 2023 at 1:57 p.m. | UPDATED: September 20, 2023 at 5:31 p.m.



Pour the concrete, paint the lines and stand up the nets.

Centennial lifted its [six-month ban on the construction of outdoor pickleball courts](#) shortly before midnight Tuesday after the City Council passed new rules and regulations for a sport that has [exploded in popularity across the country](#) in recent years. It also has generated a spate of noise complaints nationwide and resulted in [court closures and lawsuits](#).

The vote to end the March moratorium on new court construction was 9-0 during the four-hour meeting. But several council members noted that this is not the end of the discussion about the potential impacts of pickleball play.

“We do need to get something on the books, at least a line in the sand right here,” Councilman Richard Holt said. “It’s not going to be perfect — this is the first shot we’re doing. Denver metro is looking at us, (so is) Colorado, maybe even nationwide. I think we’re one of the first municipalities to tackle this issue. And version 1.0 probably won’t be perfect.”

Centennial’s new ordinance forbids any permanent outdoor pickleball courts within 250 feet of a home’s property line. Between 250 feet and 600 feet from a home, the city will require a permit before a court can be built, and the sound of play from that court cannot exceed 47 decibels as measured at the nearest property. That is a noise level roughly equivalent to the sound of a refrigerator, according to a [Yale University decibel chart](#).

Before a court can be established, an acoustical analysis will have to be conducted to determine the noise level in that zone. Noise mitigation measures, such as sound walls, can be incorporated into the design to comply with the noise requirements.

Beyond 600 feet from a home, the city won’t require a permit to build a pickleball court.

The ordinance also restricts play to between the hours of 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. Court lighting must be turned off by 8 p.m. Temporary pickleball courts, where people lay down tape to mark the court boundaries and pop up a portable net, are not allowed within 350 feet of a home.

Councilman Don Sheehan said the city could tweak the buffers once it gets feedback from residents but noted the urgency to act now.

“We need to pass this because we have no other choice,” Sheehan said. “We have a moratorium that is expiring and we have nothing on the books that do anything to stop the noise that’s going to impact our citizens.”

Those noise impacts in Centennial have been more speculative than actual, given the scarcity of outdoor pickleball courts in the city now. But a number of residents [registered strong disapproval of the city’s moratorium](#) in the weeks after it was passed, saying Centennial was draping a wet blanket over a sport that promotes fitness among an increasingly overweight population.

Meanwhile, the fight over pickleball noise has been very real in other places, including in Denver, which [closed courts in Congress Park](#) in the spring in response to noise complaints from neighbors.

Spendiarian & Willis, an acoustic engineering firm [hired by Centennial](#), said what makes pickleball strikes so uniquely nettlesome is that they produce quick “impulsive” sounds, which are akin to “sounds that contain important information about our environment such as footsteps, a door opening, a tap at the window, or speech.”

“Continuous false alarms such as the popping sound created by pickleball paddle impacts make it difficult to relax, concentrate, or sleep soundly without disturbance as each time a pop is heard it draws the attention, creating distraction,” the firm’s report states.

It’s critical to soften those impacts for quality of life in this suburban city of 107,000. Councilman Mike Sutherland said

“Many of us have invested a lot of money to live in our homes,” he said. “I’m in favor of that — neighborhoods and homes are what make Centennial valuable.”


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