

Open Work Session
Public-Private Partnership with Richard A. Henson Family YMCA
May 18, 2021

Mr. Steve Miller, Director of Recreation, Parks & Tourism; Mr. Tom Evans, YMCA Corporate Board Member; Ms. Deanna Harrell, YMCA Executive Director; Mr. Robbie Gill, YMCA Chief Executive Officer; and Mr. Tony Sarbanes, Chair of the YMCA Administrative Board, came before Council.

Mr. Miller said there is a public-private partnership opportunity for the Harmon Field, which sits adjacent to the YMCA and is one of the oldest parks in their County system. He said it is about a 50-year-old park, and at one time Harmon Field was a hub of softball activity. Mr. McCain said he played fastpitch softball as a 20-something year old there, to which Mr. Miller responded, he has heard many stories of tales of bravery at Harmon field. He continued, at one time that was the hub facility for the County, particularly with softball and baseball activity, but things change over time. He said in the 1980s the County built the athletic complex, which has been expanded by adding more diamonds, and the softball field, which was once a major hub, is no longer a hub as it is very seldom used at this point. He said the County has a basketball court at the park, which probably needs some repair, but it is used on a regular basis. There is also a swing set at the park, not a playground, but an 80s or 70s looking style swing set. He said, basically, the County has a 50-year-old very tired, once a hub park that is now tired and a little bit run down. He said, in conjunction with the YMCA they are proposing to convert the ballfield itself into a 12-court pickleball complex that would be a lighted facility and a dedicated complex for the sport of pickleball. He said they would renovate the basketball court, including adding benches and lights for the folks that play basketball, and replace the swing set with an actual playground and add a pavilion or a shade structure. He said this would give the facility some life. Mr. Dodd asked if they would add lights, to which Mr. Miller responded, the full plan is to have a lighted facility.

Mr. Miller, said in terms of the benefits to the County, he will highlight four major benefits. 1) This would provide a brand new recreation amenity, not just for local residents, but also enhance the County's ability to attract sports marketing tournaments, which have had a lot of success. He said this would now be a facility adjacent to the YMCA and the Civic Center, so the County could really draw some sports tourism with different people that normally would not come to the County. 2) The park would be revitalized, which is in desperate need of renovation and new life. 3) It would relieve pressure from shared courts as right now the County has several facilities that share lines of pickleball with tennis. He said, for example, Kilbirnie, which is a small neighborhood park, is regularly overrun with people that just are desperately wanting to play pickleball, but parking at that facility is not setup for mass traffic, so by creating a facility at Harmon Park, it would divert pickleballers to a dedicated facility that would free up courts for tennis and relieve some pressure on some of their parks. Mr. Holloway asked if there would be restrooms at the location, to which Mr. Miller responded, yes. 4) In general, this would have a public-private relationship with the YMCA. He said Recreation, Parks & Tourism shares a lot in common with the YMCA in terms of their mission on quality of life, and this would really enhance that relationship, it would allow the County to offer some new amenities, and really strengthen that relationship and enhance their ability to deliver on their mission.

Mr. Miller said he will defer to Mr. Gill and the YMCA for their perspective, and then we will be happy to answer any questions.

Mr. Gill thanked Council for the opportunity. He explained, Mr. Tom Evans serves on their Corporate Board, and the YMCA of the Chesapeake is made up of 11 locations across the Eastern Shore as far north

as Cecil County and as far south as Chincoteague Island, and they serve about 40,000 people. He said pickleball is a fast-growing sport that they are involved in as they have about 1,000 people who are playing pickleball weekly across the Shore. He said Ms. Harrell runs the YMCA in Salisbury, and they do not have the space for these people, so partnering together makes a lot of sense. He said they have partnered with Talbot County with the YMCA in St. Michaels, which is a YMCA and a senior center in the same facility, and it actually sits on school property. He said they are also building a YMCA in partnership with Queen's Anne's County where the senior center is embedded within the YMCA so they are bringing people to one hub. He said that is what he likes about Mr. Miller's idea, as there are about 8,000 people the YMCA is serving in Salisbury already, and to have the Harmon Field sitting right there next to the YMCA, they can have complimentary services and programs. He said they can have ample parking and indoor space that can be utilized, such as the YMCA's gymnasium, for shade, and for people to eat and relax and have fun, so they are really complimenting one another when working together to make a bigger impact. He said pickleball is the fastest growing sport in the United States, and they are seeing all ages participate. He clarified, while most people think about older adults playing, they are also seeing a ton of kids participate as well as young adults. He said, from a diversity standpoint, it is a game that they are seeing everyone from all communities come together to play and participate. He said this is really a great way to repurpose a park that was once a hub and maybe it will become that again because they are providing a designated space that can really make a substantial impact and meet a gap in the community right now.

Ms. Harrell said, even though Mr. Gill mentioned that it is the fastest-growing sport, it has really been growing the last seven years. She explained, they started out with just some makeshift courts on a basketball court, taping some lines down, and now they have three indoor courts that are shared with youth tennis courts and basketball courts, so there is a constant struggle among the members wanting more playing time. She said it is a very committed group and very diverse, and age-wise everything from kids up to folks in their late 80s are playing the sport, so it is great that many people can come to play and interact with each other and be physically fit together. She said they are excited about the opportunity to partner with the County, and she thinks it is great for the community as it gives them a way to expand services for a lot of people.

Mr. Holloway said there is a basketball court people are currently using, which the players do not have to pay to use. He then asked, if this agreement is reached, will the players have to be members of the YMCA, to which Mr. Gill responded, this would be a public facility. He said the difference is, if the YMCA was providing clinics where people could learn to play the game or get lessons, people would pay for those or, if there was a tournament, they would charge for those particular events, but it would be just like any other park. He said the biggest difference is they have the YMCA sitting right there, so, from a support standpoint, if there was an issue, they would have staff right there. He said because the facility is literally sitting right beside the YMCA's property, it makes a whole lot of sense to work together.

Mr. Cannon said there is a basketball court and a softball field at the park. He then asked what the other field is being used for right now. Mr. McCain added, there is a track behind the YMCA, to which Mr. Gill responded, that is YMCA property and they use it for summer camp, youth sports programs, and a variety of things. Mr. Cannon clarified, the County does not own the track, just the ballfields and parking lot, to which Mr. Gill responded, yes. Mr. Cannon said he is trying to figure out what the pros and cons are for each party involved. He then asked how Harmon park is changing dynamically, to which Mr. Miller responded, the major change is converting the softball field into the pickleball complex. He said they would have 12 pickleball courts, which they do not have anywhere in the County, so that is the major change. He said the other changes would be improved amenities, meaning a shade structure,

restrooms, and improving the playground, but the major change is converting the softball field to pickleball courts.

Mr. Holloway said the County used to have a lot of tennis courts around the county. He then asked if the pickleball courts would be used as tennis courts, to which Mr. Miller responded, no. He explained, they are different size courts, so these would not be tennis courts, but, indirectly, this would help tennis because they would not have to share like they do at Winterplace Park and Billie Jean Jackson Park.

Mr. McCain explained, right now pickleball is so popular that people are playing on tennis courts, basketball courts, or anywhere there is a paved surface. Mr. Gill said there is crossover in that tennis players play pickleball, but there are not a lot of pickleballers who have played tennis. He said the pickleball ball is plastic and it is loud, so the pickleballers and tennis players don't really enjoy being next to each other, at least tennis players do not because they are not accustomed to the noise. He said, having a designated space creates credibility to the importance of pickleball in the community to where the game can continue to grow and flourish, and, to Mr. Miller's point, they are freeing up tennis courts so people can play tennis too, which is really a smart idea.

Mr. Dodd ask for clarification on whether the field for softball is being used, to which Mr. Miller responded, they are using it for practices. He said at one time it had lights, but the pole has rotted out, so the lights are no longer there, so, essentially, it is a practice field now. Mr. Dodd said he has seen a lot of kids playing there in uniforms, so he thought they were playing with a league. He said he knows the City did away with the baseball field in the City park. Mr. McCain said they used to use it on occasion, especially when they have tournaments. Mr. Miller clarified, it is very sporadic, as it is mostly a practice facility, which they have quite a few of. Mr. Dodd said he would hate to see the County do away with another ballfield. Mr. Miller said he thinks the County has Nick Meyer down the road, and he does not remember how many diamond fields they have, but it is not an issue with meeting the demand. He said he does not foresee that as being an issue, whereas they are meeting a public demand and creating a new amenity for pickleball.

Mrs. Acle said she sees the demand as there is a group from the west side that travels to Ocean Pines to use their pickleball court. She then asked if Recreation and Parks would provide the clinics and camps, to which Mr. Gill responded, they would be working together. Mr. Miller said he wanted to bring this idea before Council to gage the temperature of the concept itself, but they would create a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) if they move forward. He said the MOU would answer questions like maintenance, usage, programing, scheduling, and how the relationship would work. He said they have talked about a cooperative arrangement where the YMCA could program it, but it would always be open to the public where someone that just wants to play can come to the park and play.

Mr. Holloway said he had asked earlier if anyone would be charged, and they said it would be free. He said he thinks the Council is not concerned about the County owning the land, but at some point in time in the future when someone cannot use the pickleball facility because the YMCA is involved, he does not think the Councilmembers would want to hear those complaints.

Mr. Cannon said the only question he has, and it may be in the MOU when it comes forward, is how they define who has priority to use the field or the pickleball courts, would it be a member of the YMCA, or can people from the County just walk up there and say they are going to play, and how is it going to be determined what happens, to which Mr. Gill responded, it would not be any different than the tennis courts the County currently has now. He said the County does not have a staff person checking to see if

that person is a resident or to see if they live in Ocean City or Easton, as it is public access. He said there will be programming available because what pickleballers are looking for are people who want to learn the game and be taught how to play. He said then, as people play, they want to participate in leagues just like a softball league where they get to play other folks, so to really make that strong, they want to provide a programming component as well. He said, for example, at the Easton YMCA every morning there are 70 people who play pickleball every day, and some are members, but some are not, and they play on tennis courts. He said, from a recreation standpoint, they are going to see just a large number of people going to that specific space to play pickleball. He said, just like if a kid went there today to shoot basketball, there is not anyone staffing that park to see if they are a Wicomico County resident.

Mr. Cannon asked, if three or four people from the County want to play and they show up and there are people from the YMCA on the court, how do they determine who gets to play when there is a combination of members of the YMCA and members of the community, to which Mr. Gill responded, the YMCA members are citizens of the community too. He said, logistically, imagine it this way - there is a partnership with the senior center in St. Michaels and there is a group exercise room that may be used for a YMCA class at 9:00 a.m. and then the senior center may be running a different kind of class at 10:00 a.m. He said it is all in one space, so they are going to have open time for participation and play. He said they may have a clinic being run by the County at 11:00 a.m. on the courts, and the YMCA running an after-school program at 3:00 p.m. on the courts, and that schedule would be provided for people to see, but probably they would find that about 95 percent of the time it is going to be open play for people within the community to play pickleball.

Mr. Miller said he thinks with 12 courts, even if they had a youth program or clinic, they would have a certain amount of courts that would always be open for the public. He said the only time he can envision it would be closed, which would be no different than any other facility, is if there is a major event, a big tournament for which they need all 12 courts, so it would not be open, but they would schedule programming so that courts would be open for the public.

Mr. Gill said playing pickleball is different from playing tennis, such as with tennis they would find four people and play tennis for an hour and a half, but pickleball is very communal. He explained, when they get to the court there could be 20 people and a game takes about 8 to 10 minutes. He said then people rotate in and out, so it is not like golf or tennis, it is communal in that they may have 40 people show up and play each other during open play, so it is building relationships among community members.

Mr. McCain said that is the big part of its popularity, as it is a very inviting game and the people who participate are getting other people to participate. He said, to Mr. Cannon's question, it is really not much different than tennis courts or ballfields around the County, which are open to the public and then sometimes they have tournaments going on so they are being utilized for events, but most of the time they are sitting there available for the public.

Mr. Holloway asked if the lighting will be set on a dial so people can use it at night as well as in the daytime, to which Mr. Miller responded, that is one of the things they have discussed, but they have not made a final decision yet. He said that is something they have kicked around as the YMCA can manage it for the County because they have staff until 10 p.m., so he does not have an answer to that question yet as they would have to work through that idea. Mr. McCain said the Salisbury University tennis courts, before they tore them down, had a dial that was a timer. Mr. Dodd said there is one at the City Park, which he thinks is for 30 minutes.

Mr. Hastings said on his dad's grave are flowers and a pickleball. He said there is nothing that his dad enjoyed more in the last to 8 to 10 years of his life than pickleball. He said he had an absolutely amazing family of pickleball folks at the YMCA, and he is glad that the County is moving in this direction as it is really needed. He said the lighting was an issue for him, but it sounds like that will be worked out. He said this is a diverse group that used to be just seniors a decade ago, but now it is more diverse, and it is a great group of folks, and it is a fast-growing sport.

Mr. Dodd asked Mr. Miller to work on the Memorandum of Understanding and bring it back to Council. He said he thinks there are a few questions that will still need to be addressed.

There was no further discussion.




Larry W. Dodd, President, District 3




Joe Holloway, Vice President, District 5



John T. Cannon, At-Large




William R. McCain, At-Large



Ernest F. Davis, District 1



Nicole Acle, District 2



Josh Hastings, District 4



Laura Hurley, Council Administrator