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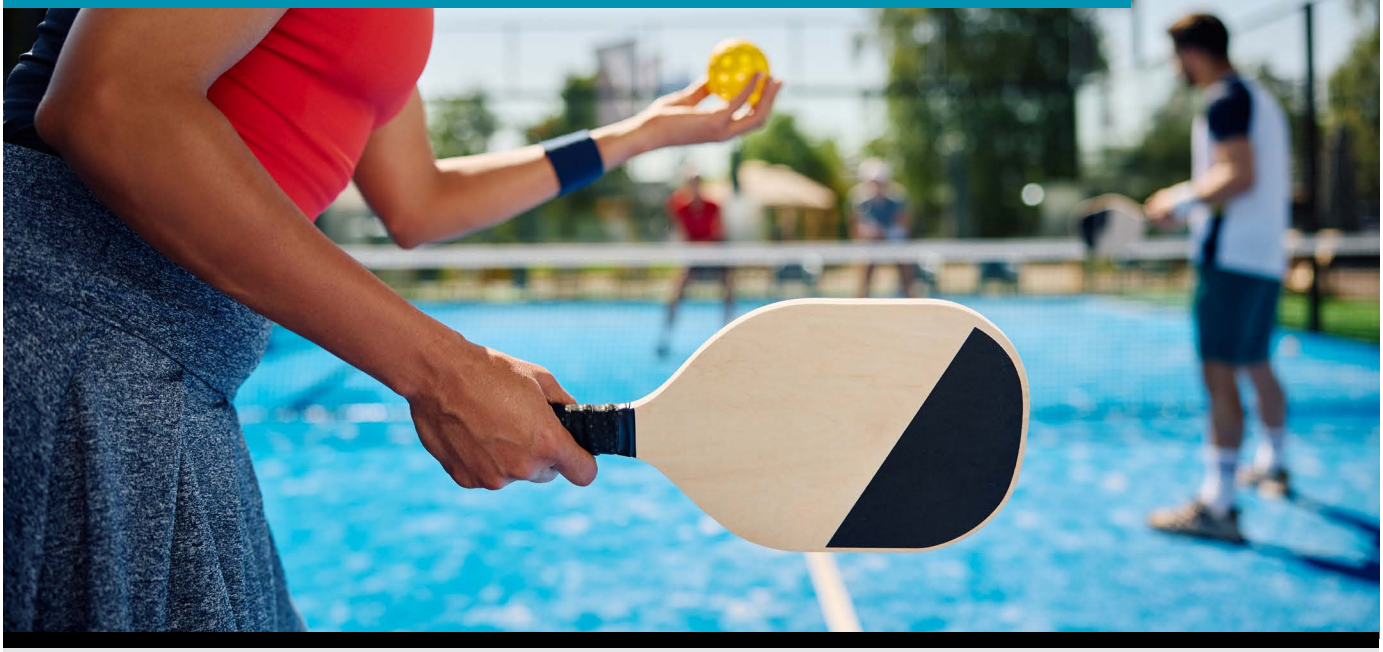
Managing Pickleball Noise Through Zoning



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Managing Pickleball Noise Through Zoning

By Charles Leahy

What began as a friendly, fast-growing sport has become a recurring source of conflict in communities across North America. Fueled by low cost, wide appeal, and minimal space requirements, pickleball has quickly become a must have recreational land use—often shoehorned into parks, clubs, and residential areas with little foresight. But with the sport's rise has come an unexpected backlash, as neighbors report escalating noise, declining property values, and a deteriorating quality of life.

What's become clear is that zoning codes are unprepared and do not have provisions specific to this new and unexpected noise. With an estimated 20,000 separate zoning authorities in the U.S., there is considerable work ahead.

This issue of *Zoning Practice* offers a framework for planners and local officials seeking to amend existing zoning ordinances in a way that balances demand for pickleball courts, neighborhood compatibility concerns, and legal risk. It begins by highlighting common triggers for conflict before identifying the acoustic characteristics that differentiate pickleball from other common recreational activities, explaining why local noise ordinances are the wrong tool for the job, and outlining an alternative approach to regulating court siting through special permits, setbacks, and use-specific standards.

A spatial comparison of tennis, pickleball, and basketball courts (Credit: Nicholas Klein/ iStock/Getty Images Plus)

Why Pickleball Noise Is Different

Media coverage and lawsuits have brought the issue into sharp focus. One common trigger for conflict involves municipal or county parks. The recreation department creates pickleball courts and encourages play, while nearby residents demand relief. The resulting tension spills into city council meetings, with public comment periods filled by dueling factions of players and neighbors. Conflict escalates as residents call for noise ordinance enforcement, and public records requests are filed by both sides.

Another common trigger involves private facilities, where planners and local officials have tried to manage court construction or respond to complaints using existing zoning tools. These efforts have led the city into litigation with the court owners, exposing the limits of outdated zoning never designed to address the scale or acoustic profile of pickleball.

Noise concerns often arise when existing tennis courts are converted for pickleball play. In many cases, these conversions have been reversed, with cities or clubs restoring the courts to their original tennis use in response to neighbor complaints. This pattern of converting, encountering problems, and reverting suggests that the differences between tennis and pickleball are not superficial, they are central to understanding the nature of incompatibility.

The Sound of Pickleball

Unlike tennis, which features a soft ball and a racquet with flexible strings, pickleball involves hard plastic balls and solid-faced paddles. With smaller courts and less running, player competence is quickly achieved, and fast paced exchanges create paddle strike rates of up to 900 hits per hour per court. With four courts placed on a repurposed tennis footprint, the result is 3,600 sharp "pops" per hour, echoing in random succession for hours, often dawn to dusk.

Here is an actual audio recording of play on four pickleball courts, 65 feet from neighboring residences: **audio of pickleball noise from 4 courts**.

While tennis is typically quiet and formal with fewer players per court, pickleball is more social and group-oriented, mostly a doubles game. Players drop in without set schedules, leading to clusters of active pickup games and groups waiting nearby. The informal and highly social nature contributes to more frequent shouting, laughter, and other vocalizations that amplify the overall noise impact.

While other recreational uses, such as playgrounds and basketball, can generate noise, their impacts are self-limited by the school and work schedules of the users. In contrast, pickleball is especially popular among seniors and retirees who gather to play in the early morning hours. This is compounded by a younger after-work crowd that fills the courts in the evenings and on weekends, resulting in near-continuous daily use and prolonged noise exposure to nearby residents.

Acoustic Properties That Matter

The human response to pickleball noise is driven by an unusual combination of particularly intrusive qualities:

- **Sound Pressure Level (Decibels):** Commonly understood as loudness, pickleball paddle strikes are approximately 20 decibels louder than tennis, which—due to the logarithmic nature of the decibel scale—represents a fourfold increase in acoustic energy and is perceived by listeners as dramatically louder, especially in quiet residential settings.

Doubles play on a pickleball court in a public park (Credit: pics721/iStock/Getty Images Plus)

Table 1: Nuisance Noise from a Dog Kennel vs. Pickleball Courts

Noise Characteristic	Dog Kennel	Pickleball
Loudness	How upset is the dog?	How hard did the paddle hit the ball?
Variation	Growl, bark, whine, yap	Each paddle and ball combo has its own impulsiveness, tone, and reverberation
Number	Depends on the number of dogs, the temperament of each dog, and the frequency of triggering conditions	15 pops per minute per active court
Predictability	Unpredictable	Persistent during core hours, random during slow hours
Exposure	Random and intermittent	Often 12 to 15 hours per day under favorable weather conditions

- **Impulse Noise:** With a fast attack and short decay within 2 milliseconds (.002 seconds) followed by a reverberating tail of 20 milliseconds, the impulse created by a paddle strike crests at a peak level substantially above the background noise, making these sounds startling and difficult to ignore.
- **Acoustic Frequency:** Each paddle strike is centered around 1,250 Hertz—where human hearing is most sensitive—making them subjectively more annoying.
- **Lack of Spectral Masking:** The random staccato pattern stands out sharply, unlike the steady hum of urban noise.
- **High Rate Repetition:** Each court generates 900 pops per hour, and with multiple courts, the daily noise exposure can be many thousands of individual noise events.
- **Propagation Characteristics:** High-frequency impulsive sounds reflect and travel efficiently; landscaping and fencing provide little relief, while nearby structures and pavements can unintentionally amplify and redirect the sound up to 1,000 feet.

The Biology of Annoyance

Impulsive noises—sudden, sharp, and irregular—trigger an inherited physiological response deeply rooted in human survival. The sudden breaking of a branch in the woods, for example, activates the endocrine system's "fight or flight" response—a mechanism that evolved to help early humans detect and react to threats. This neurological alarm system is deeply inbred, involuntary, and it cannot be simply ignored.

With repeated and prolonged exposure, the body's stress-response systems remain activated, leading to a cascade of negative health outcomes. Over time, this results in not only psychological distress—such as anxiety, irritability, and fatigue—but also physiological harm, including elevated cortisol levels, disrupted sleep patterns, and cardiovascular strain. In short, the noise violates the body, making it an inherently incompatible use near residential dwellings.

Why Traditional Noise Ordinances Fail

A natural response to complaints is to enforce the local noise ordinance. But this approach has repeatedly failed.

Most local noise codes rely on A-weighted decibel limits designed for continuous, broadband sounds such as traffic, music, and general urban activity. However, when applied to the impulsive noise of pickleball, these measurements significantly understate the true impact—often resulting in readings that fall below enforceable thresholds, despite clear community disturbance.

Local enforcement officers do not have the specialized equipment and training for measuring impulsive noises. Enforcement is reactive and complaint-driven, placing the burden on residents. Departments tasked with enforcement—such as code compliance or law enforcement—are limited to issuing a citation, ultimately involving prosecutors and judges when the violator does not agree to pay the fine. When the courts are publicly owned it is politically and institutionally difficult to issue citations against the city recreation department.

The Role of Local Staff and Departments

Understanding the distinct roles and limitations of local government departments is crucial to assessing the present situation as well as crafting future policy.

Recreation Department: Serving Demand, Not Preventing Conflict

Recreation departments manage parks and prioritize access and user equity. Community engagement—often via online surveys—can elevate pickleball as a must have top priority, sometimes based on feedback from nonresidents or sport advocates. However, recreation departments are not experienced with managing land use compatibility. Poor choices have often led to eventual court closures and return to tennis, but often only after years of ongoing controversy.

Code Enforcement: Too Little, Too Late

Code enforcement is reactive. It often lacks jurisdiction or tools to address impulsive recreational noise. Where complaints are substantiated, enforcement can still be slow, politically fraught, and ineffective, especially when local recreation departments are the source of the nuisance. Without clear standards tailored to pickleball's unique sound profile, enforcement staff struggle to take meaningful action. The result is frustration on both sides and a lack of resolution.

Planning Department: A Preventive, Structured Approach

The planning department has the right tools and experienced staff to prevent conflict. Zoning codes allow for use classifications, setbacks, conditional use permits (CUP), and variances—all applied through a transparent process with hearings, staff reports, and public input. This ensures thoughtful, consistent decision-making grounded in the purpose of the ordinance—protecting public health and welfare by separating incompatible land uses. Planning commissions and zoning boards also offer forums for appeals and public oversight, which helps maintain legitimacy.

The planning department has the right tools and experienced staff to prevent conflict.

City Attorney: Legal Risk Management

The municipal attorney plays a vital role in drafting enforceable ordinances and defending decisions. Poorly sited courts on city land can expose local jurisdictions to litigation under nuisance law. Legal counsel can help avoid costly errors and ensure that regulations withstand judicial scrutiny. Municipal attorneys are well versed in the local zoning ordinance and can craft amendments needed to incorporate pickleball planning.

Local Legislative Body: Reducing Political Risk

Without a comprehensive zoning ordinance, the legislative body becomes the forum for ad hoc decisions, eroding public trust and drawing elected officials into controversy. Elected officials benefit when land use disputes are addressed through

A dedicated indoor pickleball facility in Mount Prospect, Illinois (Credit: patty_c/ iStock Unreleased)

a formal process managed by experienced planning staff rather than public outcry or case-by-case appeals and media attention.

Tools For Mitigating Pickleball Noise

A suite of noise control tools is available, but each comes with trade-offs. Effective design of the zoning ordinance begins with a realistic understanding of how each tool works in practice.

Complete Indoor Enclosure

When courts are fully enclosed within a building, exterior noise emissions can be reduced to negligible levels. Cities may wish to incentivize indoor development by granting such uses by right, without the need for a conditional use permit. Alternatively, cities may issue CUPs with simple operational conditions, such as requiring all doors to remain closed during play and prohibiting any amplified music or announcements outdoors of the building.

Distance and Setbacks

Sound energy diminishes naturally with distance. Setbacks are especially powerful because they impose no additional cost on developers and require no enforcement mechanism. As a result, a well-calibrated setback standard is the most effective and reliable zoning tool available. A substantial starting setback can give the other mitigation solutions a better chance of success by guaranteeing a partial dissipation of the noise.

Barriers and Walls

Sound walls are a common response to community complaints, but their effectiveness depends heavily on materials, location, and design. A fundamental misunderstanding is to visualize sound as a linear "bullet" that can be blocked by a line-of-sight obstacle. In truth, sound energy radiates outward from the paddle in a three-dimensional bubble, rising and spreading in all directions. This allows sound to flank over the top of barriers. Typical barriers stand at least 10 feet tall, leading to high construction costs and conflict with fence height limits in residential areas. Barriers also impair airflow and reduce visibility for players, neighbors, and police departments. Barriers cannot protect two story homes. Despite these limitations, barriers may still play a supporting role when combined with adequate setback distances.

Are Barriers an Actual Solution?

Mass-loaded vinyl barriers—often marketed under brand names like Acoustifence—have quickly become a popular choice for pickleball noise. These flexible, dense, one-eighth-inch-thick vinyl sheets easily attach to existing fences. The material performs well in lab tests that judge its ability to block noise from passing straight through.

Yet real-world effectiveness frequently falls short. Outdoor noise control is complicated by sound diffraction, the natural phenomenon where sound waves spread over or around barrier edges. Resident accounts often paint a critical picture, pointing out that each of the impulsive popping noises remains clearly audible although the barrier advocates may be technically correct in saying that the measured decibels of loudness are somewhat lessened.

A prominent example arose at San Gorgonio Park in San Clemente, California. In 2018, the city converted two tennis courts to eight pickleball courts. City staff added 10-foot tall Acoustifence panels in 2021. A frustrated homeowner living about 350 feet away filed a 45-page lawsuit, representing herself and recounting the long history of interactions with city hall. In November 2024, the city council voted four to one to revert the courts to tennis play, thus ending the lawsuit.

This case underscores a critical lesson: barriers are often insufficient for noise mitigation at residences as far as 350 feet. And the standard solution is to simply return the facility to tennis play.

Quiet Equipment

Innovations like the OWL (Optimized Whisper Level) paddle and the Librarian quiet foam ball offer meaningful reductions in loudness, frequency, and general annoyance. However, acceptance remains low, which leads to significant enforcement difficulties. Players prefer to use their own equipment, and facilities struggle to enforce quiet paddle mandates without dedicated staff. And yet in commercial or membership-based settings, and even public parks, a CUP can mandate the hiring of onsite supervisors and thereby prohibit personal paddles and mandate on-site rental or checkout of pre-approved quiet paddles and balls.

Hours and Days of Operation

Time-of-day and days-of-play restrictions can be effective but hugely controversial. The difficulty is that the weekends, holidays, and evening hours are the most intrusive noise burdens on neighbors because ambient noise is lower, and residents expect rest and recovery from the stresses of work, school, and weekday activity. At the same time, players put a high value on 10- or 12-hour days of play, seven days a week. Operators, whether a recreation department or private party, are deeply resistant to having an underutilized facility.

To be effective, experience has shown that real periods of no noise, including entire quiet days and substantial hours of quiet on certain days of the week, can help the neighbors tolerate the noise and demonstrate the local jurisdiction's commitment to residential well-being. For example, limiting the hours to 10 hours, seven days is not an effective limitation. Providing no play after 6 p.m. and no play on Sunday can be more effective. Code enforcement officers and police can enforce clearly stated playing hours.

Player Voices

By its nature and culture, pickleball is a boisterous activity. Even with quiet-play rules, players are largely powerless to rein in the spontaneous outbursts, laughter, and on-court banter that define the joyful culture of the game. Distance remains the most practical and reliable solution.

Practicality of Mitigation Tools by Ownership Type

Noise mitigation strategies must be tailored to the practical realities of the zoning applicant. Planners and local officials should anticipate different types of applicants and be ready to craft conditional permits accordingly.

Public Parks and Recreation Districts

Publicly owned parks often involve four, eight, 12, or more courts clustered for tournament or league play. These are often open for extended hours of 10-12 or more hours daily and have high intensity of use. Players often drive from long distances from other cities, increasing overall traffic and usage levels. In these cases, enforcement of quiet equipment is difficult, unless the park employs rangers with both presence and authority. Barriers are expensive and may be cost-prohibitive. Instead, the local planners and officials should favor large setbacks as the intensity of usage guarantees complaints from close-in neighbors. Experience shows that violation of posted hours should be expected unless the courts are fenced and locked.

Commercial Developers and Franchises

Developers often repurpose big-box retail spaces and other underutilized buildings, offering soundproof play in a climate-controlled environment. However, when developers also propose outdoor courts, the CUP should require substantial setbacks, use of quiet paddles, and clear hours of operation. Equipment rentals and loaners can be enforced and ensure that only low-noise gear is used.

Private Membership Clubs and Country Clubs

These applicants often have well-resourced boards and legal teams. They may resist restrictions and lobby or litigate for exceptions. CUP conditions should treat these uses like any other, requiring compliance with setbacks, limited hours, and noise mitigation strategies. Clubs are often able to enforce quiet equipment rules and limited hours since player access is already restricted by membership requirements.

Private Residential Installations

Difficult cases arise when individual homeowners play pickleball on their private lots. Given the potential for chronic neighborhood disturbance, planners and officials may choose to prohibit private courts altogether in residential zones. As a minimum, these courts should meet the same conditions applied to other recreational facilities: setbacks, hours of use, and possible equipment restrictions. The zoning provisions should clarify that both permanent and temporary pickleball activity (such as lining a basketball court or driveway and bringing in portable nets) are subject to the same zoning scrutiny.

A moment of spontaneous exuberance during a pickleball match (Credit: kali9/E+)

Homeowners Associations

Homeowner associations (HOAs) were designed for land use efficiency, with tennis courts placed near homes without issue. When those courts are converted to pickleball, the noise impact changes dramatically, and conflict erupts. Residents of HOAs deserve the same health and safety protection that the governing jurisdiction provides in other neighborhoods. Consistent zoning and permitting processes are needed as internal HOA governance leaves too many citizens without meaningful recourse.

Designing the Zoning Amendment

Cities across the country are beginning to confront the land use and noise conflicts created by outdoor pickleball. Some leading examples are Torrance, California (Ordinance No. 3931); Centennial, Colorado (Ordinance No. 2023-O-10); Park City, Utah (Ordinance No. 2022-08); Sagaponack, New York (§245-34.S); and Easttown Township, Pennsylvania

(Ordinance No. 469-25). No single ordinance stands out as a definitive model, but taken together, these first movers offer a framework of best practices.

Define Pickleball as a Distinct Land Use

The zoning ordinance should explicitly define pickleball as a distinct, noise-generating land use. This definition may take the form of classifying "pickleball play" as its own land use category or as a specialized subcategory within outdoor recreational facilities. Importantly, the definition should encompass both permanent courts—with fixed nets and painted lines—and temporary setups, such as portable nets wheeled onto driveways, tennis, or basketball courts.

The regulatory trigger should be the noise-producing activity itself, not just the construction of a fixed facility. This approach allows a proper response to unpermitted temporary play when it results in significant neighborhood impacts.

Applying the same zoning standards to publicly owned facilities promotes fairness, reduces community conflict, and reinforces public trust in the commitment to neighborhood livability.

Require Zoning and Permits for Publicly Owned Courts

A critical component is ensuring that municipal-owned courts and those operated by independent park districts within the local jurisdiction are captured within the scope of this land use definition. Applying the same zoning standards to publicly owned facilities promotes fairness, reduces community conflict, and reinforces public trust in the commitment to neighborhood livability—particularly given that public courts account for a significant share of the nationwide problem.

Define the Noise-Sensitive Receptors to Be Protected

A zoning amendment should specify that the following nearby land uses are considered "noise-sensitive" and entitled to protection from intrusive noise levels:

- Residential properties (including nonconforming or legacy residential uses)
- Schools
- Senior living facilities
- Hospitals and medical offices
- Religious institutions
- Professional offices that depend on quiet environments

These land uses are especially vulnerable to impulsive noise, which can disrupt rest, learning, concentration, speech comprehension, and emotional recovery—core functions of these environments.

Establish the Distances for a Three-Tiered Permitting Structure

A promising structure gaining traction is a three-tiered permitting approach based on proximity to noise-sensitive uses:

- **Prohibited Zone:** A setback distance and buffer zone where outdoor pickleball is simply not allowed.
- **Conditional Use Zone:** An intermediate distance where courts may be approved with mitigation, public notice, and discretionary review.
- **By-Right Zone:** A distance at which courts may be allowed without special review if zoning criteria are met.

This approach offers clarity, administrability, and a defensible connection to acoustic realities, helping planners and local officials prevent conflict altogether where the risk is high, manage impacts where distances are marginal, and streamline approval where distance alone provides a reliable degree of reduced conflict.

Prohibited Zone

In this inner zone, typically a specified distance of 250, 350, or 500 feet, outdoor pickleball courts should be outright prohibited due to the certainty of incompatible land use and the low probability of other mitigations to fully resolve the conflict. Choosing a relatively large distance such as 350 or 500 feet will provide maximum protection and reduce the number of conflicts.

Conditional Use Permit Zone

In the middle zone pickleball may be allowed only by conditional use permit. In these cases, the applicant and planning staff must design and demonstrate site-specific noise mitigation. A discretionary permit process, including notice and a public hearing, gives residents a voice, while allowing planning staff and commissioners to evaluate whether the mitigation is adequate.

By-Right Permit Zone

Beyond about 800 feet in low-noise environments, a pickleball court may be permitted by right, provided the applicant and staff verify that the setback is accurate and the court complies with any general development standards. At this distance, the sound is still audible but significantly dissipated by natural conditions, and the risk of significant annoyance is substantially reduced. Choosing a relatively large distance such as 800 feet will give the planning staff greater ability to resolve conflicts by adjusting the mitigation requirements after play has begun and the neighbors begin to experience the long-term effects.

Define How Setbacks Are Measured

For consistency with traditional measures, the best practice is to specify measurement from the nearest fence line or edge of the paved playing surface of the court to the property line of the nearest noise-sensitive use. The use of property lines for the receiving location recognizes that residential and institutional properties are entitled to the quiet enjoyment of their entire parcel including backyards and outdoor spaces.

Use Caution with Minimum Lot Size Standards

Some communities structure their zoning codes using minimum lot size categories—for example, R-80 or R-120 zoning, where the number refers to the minimum square footage or acreage of the lot. While this structure may be acceptable for some uses, owners of large lots often position courts at the far edge of their property to maximize separation from their own living spaces, pushing the court closer to neighboring homes. For this reason, minimum lot size standards should not substitute for setback requirements.

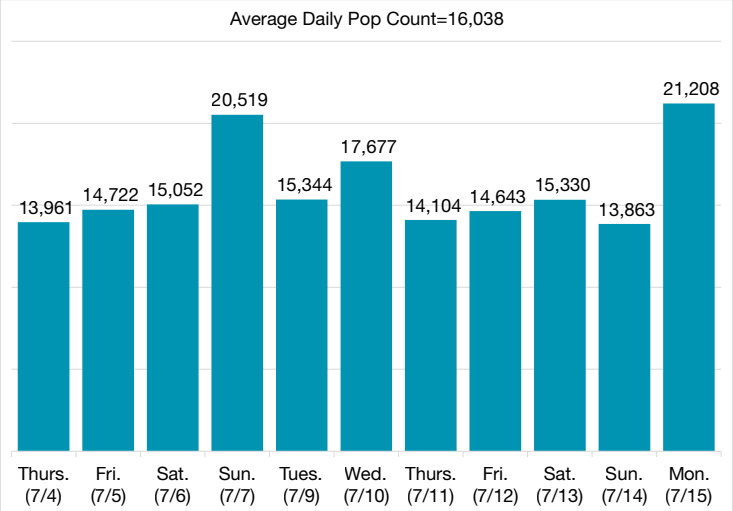
Use Caution with Acoustical Testing

Incorporating acoustic testing into the permit review process may appear objective. But in practice, acoustic testing has been seen to produce uncertain and inconsistent outcomes. The sound of pickleball is impulsive and variable, making measurements or predictions technically challenging and beyond the capabilities of municipal staff. Moreover, once testing is introduced, applicants and opponents alike may begin consultant shopping—hiring professionals who are known to

Why Decibel Limits Fall Short in CUPs

Decibels measure sound pressure level—not human annoyance. Relying solely on decibel thresholds in CUPs is inadequate for pickleball noise, which has unique acoustic traits: a sharp, high frequency "pop" concentrated around 1250 Hertz, repeated randomly hundreds of times per hour, often for many hours a day. This creates a highly intrusive and chaotic soundscape that standard dBA limits fail to capture.

Annoyance is shaped not just by loudness, but by frequency, repetition, duration, time of day, and a person's loss of control over their home environment. Courts can meet decibel targets while still provoking substantial complaints. Non-acoustic factors critical to land use compatibility—such as perceived fairness and social conflict—remain unresolved when CUPs focus narrowly on sound pressure alone. More effective tools include setbacks, limited hours, quiet paddles, and planning that prevents conflict before it starts.



Daily number of pickleball pops (i.e., number of noise events) from a noise study of four pickleball courts (Credit: NoiseNet Operations Pty Ltd)

produce favorable conclusions. This can erode public trust, escalate disputes, and burden planning staff and commissions with technical disputes beyond their expertise.

For these reasons, cities should favor clear, distance-based setback standards rather than subjective decibel thresholds or testing requirements. Setbacks are predictable, enforceable, and transparent to all parties.

Additional Limitations for Courts on Residential Lots

Zoning amendments should incorporate use-specific limitations that reflect the nature of the residential property and the intensity of use.

- **Prohibit Rentals of Residential Courts:** Pickleball courts on private residential lots should not be rented to third-party users or as a short-term vacation rental. Rentals transform the activity from personal recreation into a commercial-like operation.
- **Limit to One Court Per Residential Lot:** No more than one court should be allowed; multiple courts escalate the impact.
- **Lighting Restrictions:** If permitted at all, lighting should use fully shielded downlighting and be restricted to periods of active play and end at a specified time.
- **Hours of Operation:** Residential courts should be subject to clear limitations on hours of use, especially in the early morning, late evening, weekends, and holidays, when neighborhood ambient noise is lower and the potential for conflict is highest.
- **Prohibit Practice Backboards:** Banging the hard ball against a backboard creates even more noise than the normal impact of paddle against ball.

These limitations reinforce the principle that residentially located courts must remain truly accessory in serving an individual household's use without disrupting neighboring households' quiet enjoyment of their property.

Variances and Conditional Review

It should be expected that applicants may seek variances from these rules. Variances provide relief from zoning requirements in

A backyard basketball court, converted into a pickleball court (Credit: ucpage/iStock/Getty Images Plus)

cases of unnecessary hardship, but they must be applied carefully in the context of noise-generating recreational uses.

Applicants may argue that a strict setback requirement constitutes a hardship because it effectively prevents building a pickleball court. A variance to reduce the required setback would directly conflict with the ordinance's intent of preserving public health, safety, and welfare and should be denied.

Conversely, some jurisdictions may have zoning rules that inadvertently prevent pickleball courts from being built in industrial or commercial zones due to outdated use tables or overly rigid recreational use definitions. In such cases, a use variance may be appropriate. Allowing courts in areas that are already noisy, nonresidential, or buffered from homes aligns with the intent of minimizing noise impacts on sensitive receptors.

In many jurisdictions, pickleball-related noise problems have proven dynamic, not static. Mitigation measures that initially appeared sufficient have failed over time due to increased intensity of use, seasonal expansion, tournament scheduling, or user noncompliance. The health impacts on neighboring residents is cumulative over time, often supporting additional mitigation. For this reason, zoning ordinances that authorize pickleball facilities should include provisions for ongoing oversight and conditional reconsideration.

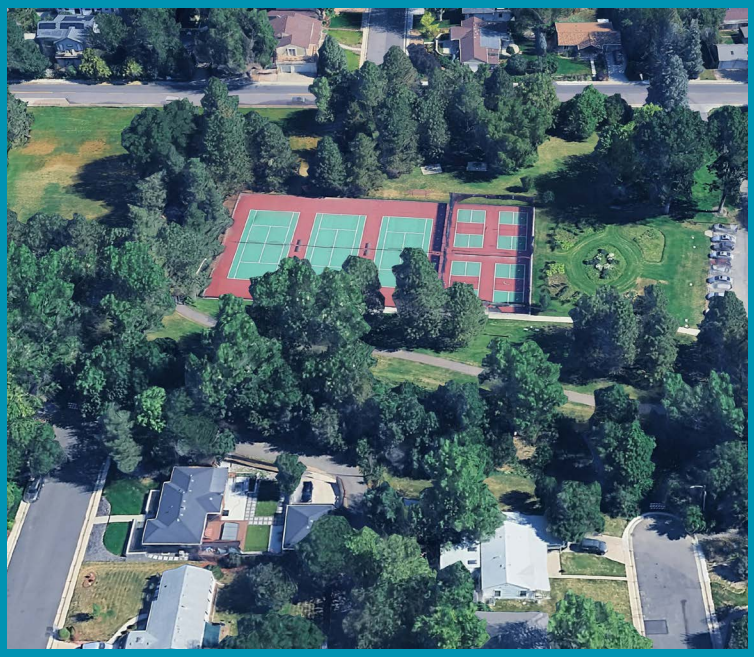
Courts facing closure or litigation can often be rescued by redeploying available mitigation tools such as quiet equipment and better management of playing hours. A provision enabling ongoing supervision might be:

"In the event that substantiated noise complaints are received from adjacent properties, or that the use of the facility intensifies beyond the levels presented in the original application, the planning commission may schedule a public hearing to consider modification or revocation of the conditional use permit. Conditions may be amended to reduce permitted hours, require upgraded mitigation, or impose other restrictions reasonably necessary to protect the public health, safety, and welfare."

A Success Story: Eisenhower Park, Denver

Eisenhower Park's outdoor pickleball courts were shut down in 2023 after persistent complaints from nearby residents. Standard mitigation approaches failed to reduce the disruptive impulse sounds at close distances. In response, the city launched a pilot "quiet court" program, reopening the courts under strict conditions: only foam Librarian brand balls are allowed, the courts close at 2 p.m. on Saturdays and remain closed all day Sunday.

While many competitive players dislike the Librarian foam ball's performance, the Eisenhower Park courts now serve a more recreational user base. Higher-level players seeking faster play migrate to other locations. This redistribution of player demand reduces acoustic pressure on adjacent homes and restores neighborhood compatibility. The Denver program demonstrates how enforceable equipment restrictions and scheduled closures can be combined to resolve conflicts without eliminating access altogether.



Pickleball courts at Mamie D. Eisenhower Park in Denver (Credit: Google Earth)

Conclusions

Pickleball has become a significant land use conflict—not because the game itself is harmful, but because its unique acoustic signature and rapid expansion have outpaced zoning codes. The burden of accommodation should not fall on nearby residents when the noise impacts are measurable, foreseeable, and preventable.

A Policy Challenge for the Governing Body

For elected officials of the legislative body, adopting a clear zoning ordinance is not just a technical task—it is a test of civic priorities. Do the officials place the health and welfare of its residents first, or do they bend toward accommodating an optional recreational use for a special group of users?

Selecting the minimum no-pickleball setback is the most important and most challenging decision. Though tempting to set a small setback distance of 150 feet as a few have done, it is the larger minimum setbacks of 250 or 350 or even 500 feet that remove the most problematic court locations and give the best chance of mitigating the noise and decisively reducing civic conflict.

Selecting the minimum no-pickleball setback is the most important and most challenging decision.

Likewise, establishing the distance at which permits are freely granted "of right" without the supervision of a CUP is a challenge. Although the noise can travel 1,000 feet, 800 feet can be a good choice as courts within a lesser distance can be successfully mitigated with a properly administered CUP and courts over 800 feet have reduced potential for serious conflict even though the noise is audible.

An equally critical policy decision is whether to apply the zoning rules to the public parks by requiring the parks and recreation departments to apply for zoning approval, just like any other property owner. When governmental departments and public parks are exempted from zoning review, trust erodes, and conflict escalates. Subjecting public parks to the same rule of law may be politically difficult but demonstrates meaningful commitment to protecting residential quality of life.

Ongoing Management Challenge for Planning Staff and Commissions

Once adopted, the ordinance must be actively implemented and enforced. Planning staff and zoning commissions must lead the CUP process: reviewing proposals, conducting hearings, applying mitigation requirements, and ensuring that permits remain in compliance over time.

This is a task that requires technical expertise, policy judgment, and consistent application—all of which reside in the zoning and permitting department. CUPs can be tailored to require quiet paddles and balls, sound barriers, and limited hours of play, but such conditions only work if the operator can enforce them and the local staff and officials are prepared to respond to violations. It is the combination of proactive zoning and continuing supervision that provide the most durable path forward.

The goal is not to ban pickleball, but to manage it thoughtfully, just as with all impactful land uses. Done well, zoning is not a barrier to recreation—it is the foundation for long-term coexistence between active parks and peaceful homes.

A well-drafted zoning ordinance gives certainty to recreation departments, developers, club operators, and homeowners seeking to invest in pickleball facilities. Variances and ongoing permit review allow flexibility without undermining its core purpose: protecting people in their homes.

About the Author

Charles Leahy is a retired mechanical engineer and attorney who became involved in a pickleball noise dispute while serving on the board of a California homeowners association. Four tennis courts became 13 pickleball courts, resulting in a nuisance lawsuit. Intrigued by the science and politics of noise, he has presented pickleball noise research papers at Acoustical Society of America meetings and given training on pickleball zoning and permitting for the International Municipal Lawyers Association.

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