

The Business of Tennis

## Cities Serve Up Tennis

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Tennis has a reputation as a sport for elites, favored by the white-shoe, country club set. Middle-class kids are far more likely to play a pickup game of basketball or baseball than pick up a racket.

But that may be changing. In cities around the country, local governments are investing big in public tennis facilities. They're hiring full-time staff, making equipment available for loan and constructing tournament-ready courts.

The result is new players for the sport, an increased fan base for professional tennis and new sources of revenue for community businesses and municipal governments.

Since 1998, 50 facilities with 25 courts or more have been built in the U.S. Ten more large facilities are currently in the planning stages, according to the United States Tennis Association. These large structures may each cost \$5 to \$10 million to construct and are usually paid for with a combination of public funds and private grants from organizations like the USTA.

The USTA has invested \$4.7 million in 150 public facilities of various size since 2000, says Virgil Christian, the association's director of community tennis development.

The surge in public tennis courts, frequently called "tennis centers," is in part due to a USTA initiative meant to create public spaces that "compete with the coffee shop and the fitness center for the space that people go to be in the company of others and to stay fit," says

Christian. According to him, the cities that build them tend to ask the same two questions: "How much are we going to invest, and what kind of revenue are we going to get?"

The investment can be quite large. Cary, N.C., a residential neighborhood near Raleigh-Durham in the Research Triangle region of [North Carolina](#), built a tennis park in 2002 using \$7 million of town capital funds. It houses 30 courts, employs 10 full-time professionals and has another dozen part-time or seasonal staff.

So far, it's come close to paying for itself. Over 20 tennis events and competitions are held at the center every year, and it's also leased out to colleges, the USTA and other organizations. That brings in about 80%, or \$800,000 annually, of the park's year-round maintenance and operation costs.

"There is a desire within communities to build large tennis centers to compete to host national events," says Sean Ferreira, the director of the park.

They're also spending to renovate older facilities. Since 2000, communities across the U.S. have sunk about \$44 million into improving and expanding existing courts, according to the USTA.

Mobile, Ala.'s tennis center, originally constructed in 1958, is today a public revenue machine. The facility, currently the largest in the country with 60 courts, was the public center most frequently used by the USTA for tournaments in 2007. The 24 events held there over the course of the year brought in an estimated \$28 million in revenues.

Ferreira thinks more cities will follow Cary and Mobile's example and invest in more tennis centers with more permanent staffs and visitor-friendly amenities, looking to increase tourism and improve resident's physical fitness.