

From: John Temple Ligon  
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To: John Temple Ligon  
Cc:  
Subject: Tennis Courts Downtown

Clay Tennis Courts a Natural Draw

On top of Wheeler Hill Columbia has an adequate tennis facility. It's called the Columbia Tennis Center, where there are nine hard courts and five clay courts. Unfortunately the pro shop at Wheeler Hill is just about shot. Built in the late 1970s, the central air and exhaust long ago fell apart, leaving the rest rooms without ventilation.

Another CTC building fitting for the courts should cost about three-quarters of a million dollars, and the campaign to get it built is well under way by the CTC's regulars. The place has two professional tennis instructors most of the time. The nearest comparable facility is at the end of 12<sup>th</sup> Street in Cayce, a stone's throw from the SCANA headquarters; but there is no clay court in an otherwise first-rate tennis compound and pro shop.

There is no hotel anywhere near the Cayce courts, and neither is there a tennis court next to a hotel/motel downtown.

Downtown could do with a tennis facility, especially one with clay courts, maybe one with nothing but clay courts. When the CTC renovation several years ago was in the middle of a debate over all clay courts or all hard courts or a combination of the two, the crowd for all clay led the discussion. Problem was, the league tennis program in town needed all hard courts and only hard courts, so a compromise concluded at the CTC with just five clay courts.

Construction cost for a clay court is about the same for a hard court, \$50,000, but the maintenance of clay courts is a bit more. That's handled by asking the tennis players on the clay courts to sweep after play, leaving the court in good playing condition at no additional costs.

As it turns out, other than the league tennis play, the clay courts at CTC always fill first.

Next for Columbia tennis, then, should be the idea of an all-clay courts complex downtown next to a major hotel and within reach of several other hotels. Also, a stadium court seating a few hundred people needs to be included. The best land buy for tennis courts downtown could be along the Congaree River banks where the potential for flooding is too great for conventional construction. Tennis courts, however, could probably risk flooding and gain the same building permits that allow for the river walks on both sides.

In the Innovista Master Plan issued in 2007, plenty of riverside land is left undeveloped as open land parks, particularly in what is named the Congaree Regional Waterfront Park, a stretch of riverside property running from Gervais Street to past Blossom Street.

Three or four acres of land are enough for 14 clay courts and a pro shop, a building somewhere between the shack we have on Wheeler Hill and the far grander two-story job next to SCANA. To illustrate the land area needed for 14 tennis courts, a city block downtown is about four acres.

Speaking of SCANA, the parcel between the State Museum and the former Kline site where SCANA was forced to clean up several years ago could work as enough land for a 14-court tennis facility, albeit not flood-prone low ground and thereby cheap land. Just down the street from the old SCANA property, however, is a number of hotels/motels suitable for weekend tennis packages and clay court tournaments.

The Bridge, of course, sited between the Hampton Street Bridge and the Gervais Street Bridge, could be developed with its hotel in mind as the tennis tournament headquarters hotel. Columbia could really stand out here. Few cities have large clay court complexes, and none near a major hotel. Most cities do what Cayce did: Build only hard courts far away from accommodations.