

The Boston Globe

By John Laidler | Globe Correspondent | May 30, 2013

Commission weighs need for improvements to Hub's beaches

As sun-seekers prepare to flock to the beach this summer, a state panel is exploring the need to make Greater Boston's prized public coastal spots cleaner, safer, and more accessible.

Six years after it sounded an alarm about the condition of the 14 state-owned beaches in the Boston area — including Wollaston in Quincy and Nantasket in Hull — the Metropolitan Beaches Commission has reconvened to evaluate whether the state investments it spurred in beach management and upgrades have made a difference and what further improvements are needed.

As part of its work, the group plans nine public hearings this summer to gather input from local residents, including sessions in Hull and Quincy. The dates of those hearings, which follow two held at the State House, will be announced in early June.

"I think it's a great opportunity for people to talk about why they love their beaches and share ideas about how we can improve them," said Joan Meschino, a former Hull selectwoman and a commission member.

Formed by the Legislature in 2006, the commission held a round of public hearings that year before issuing its report in April 2007.

The panel, which is staffed and managed by the advocacy group Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, in its report called

the 14 beaches "an extraordinary asset for the people of the Commonwealth." But it said the state was failing in its responsibility to be a good steward of the 15 miles of coastline, saying the beaches suffered from poor maintenance, including inadequate trash removal, and a need for capital improvements.

Bruce Berman, a spokesman for Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, said the administration of Governor Deval Patrick had made significant progress in carrying out the commission's recommendations for rectifying the problems.

In addition to increasing funding for beach operations including staff, he said the state improved management, ensuring each location had a "responsible beach manager" and followed a regular maintenance schedule. He said it also "invested in critical equipment like dump trucks and sand sifters that had fallen into disrepair."

Although the state Department of Conservation and Recreation's budget for beach operations declined somewhat due to the state fiscal crunch, Berman said: "The general impression out there appears to be that conditions have just dramatically improved on most beaches."

"It was a great step forward," said state Senator Thomas M. McGee, a Lynn Democrat who cochairs the commission. "Where we are at now is taking the progress we made and bringing it to the next

level."

Meschino said an important benefit of the panel's work six years ago was to enable the various coastal areas to advocate "with a unified voice" in support of better beach conditions. She said she looks forward to that voice being sounded again to ensure the beaches continue to receive attention.

Edward Lambert, commissioner of the Department of Conservation and Recreation, said that the beaches commission was "incredibly successful in terms of calling attention to the resources and building some advocacy for the investments that were made."

Since the 2007 report, Lambert said, the state has invested \$30.6 million in capital projects at the 14 beaches in the years.

Included was \$7.8 million in upgrades at Wollaston Beach, from the realignment of Quincy Shore Drive to improvements to pedestrian and bike facilities and added amenities for beachgoers. Lambert said \$2.5 million was spent on access and safety upgrades at Nantasket Beach.

He said he was glad to have the commission renew its efforts, noting, "Any time you bring people together who have a passion for a particular facility or group of facilities, that can only help."

State Representative Garrett



Beachgoers have a water fight at Wollaston Beach in Quincy, where the state has upgraded waterfront conditions.

J. Bradley, a Hingham Democrat and commission member, said he is glad to see the renewed attention on the beaches.

"There's always more to do," said Bradley, whose district includes Hull. He said at Nantasket Beach, for instance, there are gaps in some of the sea walls that need repairing, and debris, including boulders, that has washed up on the beach.

Other members of the commission from the area include state senators John F. Keenan, a Quincy Democrat; Robert L. Hedlund, a Weymouth Republican, who represents Hull; and Douglas S. Gutro, a Quincy city councilor.

Gutro said he is pleased with the Department of Conservation and Recreation's efforts to upgrade conditions at Wollaston Beach.

"The DCR has been very attentive," he said. "Even in a time of budget cuts in the DCR, the maintenance staff have been standouts."

Going forward, Gutro said, he would like to see the commission continue to delve into the issue of water quality at the beaches, and to promote more water transportation opportunities for beach communities, including to the Boston Harbor islands, noting that Quincy is interested in expanding its existing ferry service.

Neil McCole, president of the Friends of Wollaston Beach, has seen firsthand how conditions have changed for the better at the Quincy beach.

"We're seeing a cleaner beach from the sand to the sidewalks with improved DCR maintenance," he said. "We're seeing more trash receptacles. We've had more benches added; a shade shelter was added. The bathhouse has undergone an overhaul. There has been a substantial list of improvements over the past six years. I think it's a great time to look and see how to bring it to the next level."

A priority for Wollaston Beach that McCole said he hopes the commission will address is the poor water quality that the beach experiences periodically during the summer, a problem he attributed to drainage from the neighborhood.

Keenan, a new panel member, said his goals include making sure there is adequate maintenance at Wollaston Beach "on the investments that have been made."

He also wants the commission to examine the water-quality testing process at the beaches, noting that often by the time warnings of elevated bacteria levels are posted, the actual levels have fallen due to the natural cleansing of the tides.

Meschino said she looks forward to the commission highlighting how public investment in the beaches can create economic development opportunities for coastal communities.

"Nantasket Beach is a tremendous asset that speaks to the quality of life in Hull but also connects us economically to a larger region," she said.