

The Boston Globe

The year of the beach

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IT'S SPRING, and the region's fancy turns to one of its most glorious seasonal assets: 15 miles of public beaches stretching in a sandy arc from Hull to Nahant. Sadly, however, a visit to these urban treasures too often turns up dross: broken glass, dingy bath houses, crumbling seawalls, dirty sand. These poor conditions squander the \$4.5 billion Massachusetts citizens have invested in cleaning up Boston Harbor. The water is clean enough for swimming on most days, but the approach to the shore is so unwelcoming that the benefit is lost.

Each one of the 14 beaches managed by the state Department of Conservation and Recreation has its own unique character and challenges. Nantasket Beach in Hull features a historic carousel and clock tower, ghosts of Paragon Park, the amusement park that burned down in 1984. Constitution Beach in East Boston affords a surreal view of the jets at nearby Logan Airport taking off like lumbering seabirds. In the coming months the Globe editorial page will focus on each of these underutilized resources and promote ways to redeem them.

The social, economic, and even spiritual value of these parks is hard to quantify, but the Metropolitan Beaches Commission, established by the Legislature last year, has tried. In nearly a dozen public sessions the commission met with residents of the beach communities, policymakers, labor and transportation specialists, even a youth group to assess what is needed to make the beaches clean, safe, accessible, and attractive. Then financial consultants drew up a blueprint for repairs and maintenance. Today at the State House, the environment and natural resources committee will hear legislation to implement the recommendations in the commission's final report.

Senator Jack Hart of South Boston, co-chairman of the commission, admits to a "lofty goal" of creating and maintaining "the best urban beaches in the country." But that wouldn't be so out of line with the effort that went into restoring the water resources of the harbor. "We want to create the same thing on the land side," he said.

For too long the state's commitment to beach management and upkeep has been episodic, at best. Because most of the beaches are manmade, they tend to return to their origins as mudflats or tidal swamps without regular upkeep. But the maintenance equipment is old and unreliable. The report says the entire system from Lynn to Nahant has only one functioning trash packer.

The current practice of employing part-time seasonal workers is inadequate to maintain the beaches. The DCR's own regional managers recommended to the commission that 63 full-time staffers -- landscapers, rangers, drivers, trash collectors, volunteer coordinators, and natural resource specialists -- are needed to keep ahead of maintenance problems, at a cost of roughly \$2.7 million, plus another half-million in new equipment.

The good news is that the House budget adopted Friday includes a \$2 million amendment, sponsored by the commission's co-chairman, Representative Anthony Petrucci of East Boston, for equipment and personnel at the DCR beaches. This is a solid down payment on the overall need. We hope the Senate also sees the importance of this resource to the region's health and economy, even though another of the commission's main champions, Senate President Robert Travaglini, has left office.

But history shows that the beaches need more than just money. In 1991 a similar effort to revitalize the Boston Harbor beaches led to significant structural and capital improvements, but with only spotty attention the gains eroded like a fragile sandbar in a storm. The beaches need sustained commitment, which is why one key provision in the bill would establish a position of beach co-coordinator within the Department of Conservation and Recreation, to centralize accountability. (Of course, the leadership post of DCR commissioner is still vacant as well.) A permanent advisory board of community advocates modeled on the successful Revere Beach Partnership would also be a boon.

No one denies that the Cape Cod National Seashore is one of the world's special places. But it is not easily accessible on a scorching summer afternoon. Meanwhile, an estimated 1 million residents live within a half-hour of the state's metropolitan beaches, most of them accessible by public transportation. The people's beaches await rediscovery. ■