

The Boston Globe

Officials vow to revitalize public beaches

Staff hires, equipment purchases are planned

By Matt Viser, Globe Staff | October 21, 2007

As Beach Boys tunes played over the sound system and cormorants feasted on a school of striped bass, state officials gathered yesterday at Carson Beach in South Boston and vowed to revitalize an urban network of once-popular beaches that have deteriorated over decades.

"We are committed," said Richard K. Sullivan Jr., commissioner of the Department of Conservation and Recreation. "I'm extremely optimistic that the improvements we made this summer are going to be multiplied next summer."

The state's 14 public beaches from Wollaston Beach in Quincy to King's Beach in Lynn used to be packed on the weekends with towel-toting families swimming, sunbathing, and lining up for hot dogs, ice cream, and roast beef. But with increasingly polluted waters, rising crime, and failing infrastructure, the crowds waned.

Last year the state Legislature established the Metropolitan Beaches Commission to find

ways to improve beaches in the Boston area, and yesterday the group held its first annual "Beaches Report Card" hearing to grade recent work and suggest additional improvements.

Attendees received forms so they could rate their beaches in 13 categories. The scores, once compiled, will be used to measure work each year.

"I think we'll look back and say the beaches bottomed out in 2005," said Bruce Berman, spokesman for the nonprofit advocacy group Save the Harbor/Save the Bay.

"We're on the way up," said Berman, who ranked the current state of beaches at "a low B or a high C." "People are starting to feel better about their beaches."

Sullivan, a former Westfield mayor whom the governor named this summer to head the Department of Conservation and Recreation, said that over the next several months his department is planning to spend \$2 million to hire 60 to 70 staffers,

including six who will work full time as "beach coordinators."

"It's a whole new initiative to give the beaches a point person where there's a face and personal ownership of the beach," said Sullivan, sporting a necktie of a sun shining over a beach and a palm tree.

Sullivan said his department is planning to purchase \$1 million in equipment this year, including sidewalk vacuums, trash compactors, and sanitizer machines that sift the sand to remove cigarette butts, bottles, and other trash.

"It is going to take more than new equipment and staffing," said Patricia Foley, president of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay. "People want programming - swimming lessons, concerts, kite festivals, and sand castle competitions."

Her organization, using grant money from the Boston Foundation, will dole out \$25,000 for local beaches to use to enhance programs.

State Senator Jack Hart, a South Boston Democrat and cochairman of the beach commission, repeated an old family story about eating peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches with his mother at the beaches in South Boston.

"The whole beach would be crowded; we didn't need to go to Cape Cod because we had everything we needed right here," he said. "But then pollution drove a barrier between the neighborhood and the harbor. We want to get things back to how things were 25 years ago."

But not everyone was so upbeat. "People are discouraged," said Jane Manning, an East Boston resident who lives near Constitution Beach. "The beach roses have been choked by weeds. The open trash

barrels are dive-bombed by seagulls. They don't cut the grass enough, and they don't clean it enough. I think they could do a little bit more." Manning said she gave the state poor marks in nearly every category.

"Fund-raising is going to be an issue," said Doug Gutro, president of the Quincy City Council. "We had an outstanding person working at Wollaston Beach, and he left to take a job [that paid] \$25,000 more than he was getting at DCR. We need to retain quality people."

The group also squabbled good naturedly over whose beach had the best amenities.

At one point, State Representative Kathi-Anne Reinstein, a Revere Democrat, went to the podium and called

for a boycott of ABC's "Grey's Anatomy" because of a crack a star at the show aimed at Revere Beach. Everett native Ellen Pompeo is quoted in the latest issue of American Way, the in-flight magazine for American Airlines, as saying, "Revere Beach, although it is old and historical, is dirty and not very nice."

Reinstein is joining a fifth-grade class at Whelan Elementary School in Revere to send a letter to Pompeo, critical of her statement and inviting her to the beach.

"No one loves Patrick Dempsey more than I do," Reinstein said, referring to another star on "Grey's Anatomy." "But I can't watch that show anymore."

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