

Harbor Islands and Transportation Summary

November 29, 2006

Senator Jack Hart welcomed and introduced the Beaches Commissioners present, and thanked everyone for coming to testify. He spoke briefly about the importance of the beaches, the history of the polluted Harbor, and how that pollution became a psychological barrier for people interested in going to the beach or in using the Harbor. Changing that perception is key, he said, in getting people back to the beaches and the Harbor islands. Creating accessible water transportation is a central part of dismantling the perception that the Harbor and beaches are still too dirty or unsafe to use.

Dan O'Connell then said that the issue came up as people reminisced about the water transportation service that used to exist, such as the old Nantasket ferry. He also said the issue is not only access to mainland beaches, but access to many points around the Harbor. Tom Powers from the Island Alliance said that the biggest issue in terms of managing the Harbor Islands Park is water transportation. He said the islands need more frequent ferry service, and a reduced cost for tickets on the ferries on weekdays. In addition, he said the Park needed another boat, perhaps owned by DCR and leased by the Alliance. He also said the beach on Spectacle Island is great, but needs changing facilities on the beach. Senator Thomas McGee said there was opportunity for other options, such as commuter boats from the Lynn commuter rail station, or water taxis.

Bill Walker from Harbor Express said his company runs ferries from Quincy to Georges Island as well as from Salem into the city - they offer discounts to people then boarding island ferries. Harbor Express also operates the ferry for the MBTA from Quincy to Hull to Boston to Logan. Bill said that ridership on the boats has increased dramatically during peak season, with about 72,000 people out to the islands from downtown Boston, Quincy, and Hull this year. He said the biggest challenge is letting people know what is available and how to get there. Also, in terms of the necessity of subsidies, Bill said that models such as Salem's - where the town purchased the ferry and contract out the service - work without subsidies.

Representative Kathi-Anne Reinstein said that the water quality is higher around the islands, but unfortunately, people don't know how they can get there. Susan Kane from DCR said that there were other planned gateways in the Park Service Master Plan, and that Hingham, which used to be a gateway, would be redeveloped. She said the biggest issues were not enough service, and poor inter-island service. Rich McGuinness from the Boston Redevelopment Authority stressed a comprehensive regional approach to planning water transportation. Senator Hart then talked about water transportation as an alternative to the difficult ground transportation due to construction, traffic, and the big dig, and creating an incentive to use water transportation, only if it is affordable and accessible. He emphasized that it cannot be a viable alternative without it being accessible and affordable.

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Vivien Li from The Boston Harbor Association mentioned that any capital improvements needed to have requisite funding for maintenance put in the budget. She also stressed that people don't know when the water is safe for swimming, and that there needed to be better communication in addition to activities for when the water was unsafe. She closed by saying that water transportation needs to be made more affordable, whether through coupons or commuter rail passes or some other way.

Jack Wiggin from Urban Harbors Institute at UMass Boston said that improved water transportation is key to getting the Park off the ground. He also said that Boston has a great deal of experts and experience dealing with water transportation, and that experience should be utilized.

Gil Solomon from the Masachusetts-Ponkapoag Tribal Council spoke about celebrating and communicating through using the beach, that today the islands are difficult to access, and his concerns that the younger generations are becoming distanced from nature and outdoor experiences.

Kelly Fellner from National Park Service spoke about the importance of creating affordable access for kids, and that there need to be more gateways into the park like the one that used to exist at Lynn. She also suggested improving the inter-island shuttle service. She closed by saying that the Park also needed Federal funding for infrastructure including docks.

Ed McCabe from the Hull Lifesaving Museum said there was a need for landside hubs and infrastructure such as kiosks, and he said the most important thing was getting more people out into schools to bring the kids out to the islands. Captain Russ Bowles from UMass Boston Marine Operations pointed out the underutilized potential gateways including Squantum Point in Quincy and the JFK Pier in Dorchester.

Ellen Silverstein from Marriott's Custom House mentioned that she markets to people every week in the hotel business, and while we should continue to educate local people about Boston, tourism is even more important, and we have the opportunity to bring people and money to our state through island access.

Senator Hart closed the hearing by explaining that other people were going to send written testimonies because they had run out of time, and that this was the Commission's last formal hearing. He stated that the testimony given would be clearly represented, and that everyone would be invited to a meeting to talk about the draft report.