



Chris Van Buskirk State House News Service

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Panel aims to ensure Massachusetts public beaches are accessible to all

Arguing that all people should have access to public beaches regardless of physical ability, advocates and public officials on Tuesday called for improvements and upgrades so people with disabilities can easily enjoy seaside offerings in Massachusetts.

The Metropolitan Beaches Commission and Save the Harbor/Save the Bay held the second of three hearings Tuesday focused on access to public spaces for people with disabilities as officials work toward a report in the spring. Save the Harbor/Save the Bay Executive Director Chris Mancini said the report will provide a roadmap for improvements in areas of access, equity, and inclusion.

“We are focusing on these specific issues of access in an effort to continue what has always been our mission which is to connect everybody to the beaches and the harbor and the clean water that we have in Boston,” Mancini told the News Service after the hearing. “Everybody could and should feel that ownership they have of public space and be able to use it spontaneously.”

A third hearing on linguistic barriers to safety and enjoyment on beaches is scheduled for January. The first hearing, held in early May, focused on improving equity and inclusion for people of color.

Acting Department of Conservation and Recreation Commissioner Stephanie Cooper said their Universal Access Program, which the state says “ensures equal access to outdoor recreation,” is critical to providing guidance across the agency around accessibility requirements.

The program, Cooper said, has provided a “significant number” of wheelchairs and mats for residents to access beaches across the state. Those, she said, allow for a “supportive beach experience.”

Universal Access Program Director Tom McCarthy said the agency has figured out how to meet minimum accessibility requirements and regulations for beaches but cautioned that keeping accessibility measures in place is a challenge.

“We found that without a significant focus on maintenance and management, these improvements to accessibility can disappear very quickly, it doesn’t take much of a barrier to block access to the beach,” McCarthy said. “Boardwalks buried by drifting sand, erosion at the end of a walkway that creates a six inch drop, an unreported broken beach wheelchair means we can’t claim to be providing accessibility at that particular beach.”

Boston Disability Commissioner Kristen McCosh said accessibility to beaches has a direct impact on her life as a user of a power wheelchair as a result of a disability she acquired as a teenager.

A lifelong resident of South Boston, McCosh said she grew up going to the beach everyday and now as a wheelchair user, small things can make a beach inaccessible.

“Most beaches, you can get down to the sand, most of them have ramps or sloped walkways, but when you get to the sand, there’s really no place to go,” she said. “I’ve noticed a lot of the time that there’s a gap between the end of the ramp and the beginning of the [beach] mat.”

The accessible improvements, McCarthy said, can be expensive. According to Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, mobility mats for nine beaches can run between \$10,000 and \$20,000 while beach and floating wheelchairs average about \$1,000 a piece.

“We’re really fortunate to have been given these resources to create these oftentimes expensive, accessible improvements at our beaches,” McCarthy said. “But they can, as I said before, disappear really quickly without the constant maintenance and monitoring that’s needed.”

For Mancini, some aspects of making a beach accessible come without a price tag.

“The challenge with this subject is that, I think one of the community members put it this way, we have these grand visions but you have to start with where is someone’s wheel getting stuck or where is there sand on the ramp,” he told the News Service. “So some of this doesn’t have a specific price tag.”

Many North Shore veterans find it challenging to access and fully enjoy public beaches, particularly in Lynn, said Andrea Gayle-Bennett, third junior vice commander of the Disabled American Veterans Department of Massachusetts.

In a city of roughly 100,000 residents, Gayle-Bennett said, accessibility to the beach is limited to those with physical disabilities.

“That’s because while there is a ramp at the Wallace street entrance, it’s not readily or easily identifiable as a handicap access, there’s no signage,” Gayle-Bennett said. “In addition, that ramp ends at the sand and as previously mentioned, this makes access to the full beach limited and it turns them into spectators instead of participants.”

There are mental health benefits to going to the beach, she said, and the state and municipalities should invest in proper infrastructure and equipment to make sure our public beaches are available to everyone.

“No one should ever be prevented from sitting on a public beach on a summer day, hearing the crash of the waves or the call of hungry seagulls, especially not because of a disability, much less someone who incurred that disability in service to our country,” Gayle-Bennett said. “Public beaches should be for everyone to enjoy.”

The Daily Item

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BY ADAM BASS | February 9, 2022

CRIGHTON: SIGN LANGUAGE A BARRIER TO BEACH SAFETY



State Sen. Brendan Crighton hosted a meeting to discuss language barriers with beach-safety signage at King's Beach in Lynn. (Spenser Hasak)

LYNN — State Sen. Brendan Crighton (D-Lynn) held a hearing over Zoom Wednesday morning, with members of the Metropolitan Beaches Commission (MBC) and the nonprofit organization, Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, to discuss improving language accessibility for beachgoers who are multilingual or non-English speakers.

Crighton, who serves as the co-chair of the commission, said one of the biggest challenges his constituents face is that they cannot understand safety signs or water-quality signs when going to King's Beach or Nahant Beach because English is not their first language.

"In my district, we have 40 languages spoken in our public schools," he said. "How does a family fully enjoy the beach if they can't read the sign and know what the programming is?"

Fellow co-chair of the commission, state Rep. Adrian Madaro (D-Boston), said his

constituents are also facing similar obstacles in regards to language barriers at the beaches in East Boston and said the best way to remedy this is to change the signs.

"These language barriers are quite concerning," Madaro said. "One of the ways we can fix this is to change the signs to make them more accessible for those who speak multiple languages."

Bruce Berman and Caroline Adamson of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay presented a survey during the meeting that was taken last weekend, which provided data on current sign design and what the most common issues were for those who speak a different language. The results found that around 25 percent of families in Massachusetts speak a different language, with the most common language being Spanish. The survey also found that only four signs out of 250 on Massachusetts beaches were multilingual. "We have 250 signs all over our beaches and we found only four were accessible to

those who spoke a different language," Berman said. "Of those four, one was on Nahant Beach that was in English and Spanish describing warning flags on the beach."

Additionally, the survey found that online resources for water quality and flags were only in English.

One option Berman suggested was to have all beach signs follow a set design for each subject and in multiple languages.

"In Burlington, Vt., they have simple designs that encompass all matters," Berman said. "They are also in multiple languages and are compact."

Other solutions include having QR codes on signs that provide a link for water-quality resources and other information in different languages, or having electronic Soofa Signs — which would automatically share information about the beaches in real time.

Additionally, the state Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR) has been using Google Translate to help users answer questions, comments or search inquiries of those who are non-English speakers.

The DCR is expected to use more tools shortly to improve access for multilingual and non-English speakers, such as links to resources in different languages rather than just using Google Translate.

The next step for the commission is to host a virtual summit to present its preliminary findings to a broad and diverse audience of beach users to gather thoughts and their input. The summit is expected to be held in late winter to early spring.

Following the summit, the commission will share a report of their findings and recommendations with the legislature, administration, DCR and the public.

The report will serve as a roadmap moving forward on beach accessibility-related issues.



Chris Van Buskirk | February 9, 2022

DCR Planning Multi-Lingual Changes At Beaches

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, FEB. 9, 2022.....Advocates for public beaches on Wednesday called for multilingual signage at beaches around Boston so people who do not speak English can better understand safety information and rules as they take to the water, and they got some welcome news from a top state official.

A meeting hosted by Save the Harbor/Save the Bay and the Metropolitan Beaches Commission Wednesday morning was the third in a series on accessibility at beaches. The group plans to publish a report in the spring.

"If we can't have inclusivity and equitability on our beaches, just to paraphrase a great quote from our last hearing that we all know, folks will become spectators on these beaches when they should be involved, active participants," Save the Harbor/Save the Bay Executive Director Chris Mancini said at the virtual meeting. "This is a really important issue to everybody and we're all working together on this, knowing that it's a challenge, and we have a lot of steps to go."

Bruce Berman, director of strategy and communications, said he looked at 250 signs across Massachusetts' coast and just four of them were in languages other than English. In Winthrop and Nahant, he said, there were copies of warning flags in English and Spanish, though no flags were on display the day Berman visited.

"We found one sign which at first I thought banned the use of beach chairs as space savers or on the beach but actually turns out to mean that the beach is not guarded," he said. "Finally, we saw at the Pickle Barrel, which is a really underutilized state resource that we have plans for at Carson Beach, the only sign on it is in English and Spanish and it says do not enter."

Permanent signage that includes information on beach water quality is only in English, Berman said, which he said poses a risk to people's public health. Signs warning of an undertow at Blacks Creek in Quincy are also only in English, he said.

"It's just a beach that's very popular with people that speak a lot of languages," he said. "We need to find a way to do better."

Caroline Adamson, an environmental policy intern with Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, said QR codes on beach signs can allow people to access postings in multiple languages.

"It's an incredibly easy thing to put on physical signage to link people to the multilingual resources they need," she said. "Again, we're already seeing this on a couple of the DCR signs and we would love to see it used for translation purposes as well."

New York City, Adamson said, is using social media accounts to post beach advisories with links to information in other languages and American Sign Language. In Connecticut, officials are offering resources digitally to allow for information in multiple languages, she said.

Department of Conservation Commissioner Stephanie Cooper said the department created some new multilingual signage for King's Beach in Swampscott that "we'll be deploying ... across our system, including of course, to all the metropolitan beaches."

"We are also looking at retrofitting other waterfront signage, the beach rules signs and no dogs and we are going to be using QR codes," Cooper said. "The idea is that you can scan with your phone and then access that information in all the major languages that are spoken. And the signs that we've designed so far, we have, using the environmental justice language data, we have prioritized the languages that are most spoken in those communities."

Rep. Adrian Madaro, co-chair of the Metropolitan Beaches Commission, said officials must guarantee that all people can enjoy public beaches.

"These language barriers are quite concerning," he said. "In East Boston language justice and language access are not merely aspirations, they're absolute necessities to ensure the safety, well being, and success of all of our neighbors. Language access on our beaches entails providing critical safety information about water quality, weather conditions, upcoming activities, and general beach safety knowledge."

Chris Van Buskirk | June 18, 2022

Not everyone can access Massachusetts' beautiful beaches; Here's what the state is doing to change that



Nahant Beach on the North Shore. The long, narrow beach opens up at low tide into a wide plane of shallow water and shimmering sand.

The state's Metropolitan Beaches Commission reviewed preliminary findings Saturday on improving access at regional beaches in the Greater Boston area after holding three hearings over the past year on accessibility, linguistic, and equity barriers that advocates say people often encounter when heading to beaches.

The commission is hoping to use testimony gathered at the hearings to generate recommendations for the Legislature, Baker administration, and Department of Conservation and Recreation on improving beach access for people of color, those with disabilities, and residents who speak a language other than English.

"We are holding this summit to share what we heard and learned from the hundreds of people who took part in the hearings and to give them the chance to let us know if we got it right before we release our final findings and recommendations to the Legislature, administration, DCR, and the public," Save the Harbor/Save the Bay Executive Director Chris Mancini said in a statement to MassLive.

Triangle, Inc. CEO Coleman Nee said the state needs to focus on physical infrastructure at beaches, programming for people with disabilities, and funding for accessibility.

"We've seen improvements, definitely, and the commission and Save the Harbor/Save the Bay are really focused on this, but we're not at the stage where we can rest on our laurels, that's for sure," Nee told MassLive. "There's no reason why someone should grow up in a community that borders a beautiful beach and have never spent their life accessing that beach or accessing that water if that's something that they always wanted to do but just felt like they couldn't."

The commission plans to hold a fourth hearing this summer to hear from youth and teens about their experiences with beach access. Commission hearings in May and November 2021 focused on improving access to beaches for people of color and those with disabilities.

The commission and Save the Harbor/Save the Bay looked to mobility mats and beach wheelchairs to help people with physical disabilities access the beach. Grants awarded by DCR and Save the Harbor/Save the Bay also focused on organizations that promote accessibility and access for people of color.

Triangle, Inc. runs received grant funding to run programs for people with disabilities, including Beach:Ability, a day of activities at the beach with sand and floating wheelchairs.

Nee said recommendations to public officials should include a request for more funding for the Universal Access Program, a program run by DCR that helps provide outdoor recreation opportunities at state parks in Massachusetts, including some beaches, "for visitors of all abilities," according to the state.

"We'd love to see significant investments in not just the physical infrastructure of the beaches so Advocates pitched DCR on placing QR codes on beach signs to allow people to access the information in multiple languages. Department of Conservation Commissioner Stephanie Cooper previously said new multi-language signs were a work in progress for "all metropolitan beaches."

"We are also looking at retrofitting other waterfront signage, the beach rules signs and no dogs and we are going to be using QR codes," Cooper said.

A spokesperson for DCR said the administration has added new signage at more than 18 state parks and metro beaches which include QR codes that provide translation into nine different languages including Spanish, Vietnamese, Brazilian Portuguese, Haitian Creole, Chinese, Arabic, Cape Verdean Creole, Mandarin, and Russian

"The Baker-Polito Administration has taken a proactive approach to making swimming locations safer places for children, families, and others to experience," the spokesperson said in a statement to MassLive.

Save the Harbor/Save the Bay issued a water quality flagging report card last month that pointed to accuracy issues with the protocols the state uses to tell beachgoers whether water is safe to swim in.

A Department of Public Health spokesperson previously told MassLive that the state maintains "a near real-time" public website that displays marine water quality testing results.

But advocates contend the data from DPH and DCR used to inform beach water quality flags are a day late, and may not provide swimmers with the most up-to-date information.

"The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the department's beach water quality website is only available in English and hasn't been updated since 2001," a Metropolitan Beaches Commission presentation for Saturday's hearing said. "Though we met with them last week, we are still waiting for a public statement from the secretary of health and human services, [DPH] or their Bureau of Environmental Health on their plans and timeline to make their beach water quality website available in languages other than English."

A spokesperson for DPH said representatives from DPH and DCR met with members of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay on June 9 "to receive their input and discuss several topics."

At that meeting, the spokesperson said DPH shared plans to update the Beach Water Quality website "to be more accessible and invited Save the Harbor/Save the Bay to share recommendations for improving the website."

"Currently, the Beach Water Quality website is updated twice daily and includes simple text that is available for translation in over 100 languages by commonly used translation technology," the spokesperson said in a statement, echoing a similar statement provided to MassLive earlier this month.

In an email sent last week, Metropolitan Beaches Commission Co-Chair Sen. Brendan Crighton invited DPH Legislative Affairs Director Robert Oliver to testify at Saturday's hearing to provide updates on improving "posting and flagging accuracy on the region's public beaches," according to emails obtained by MassLive.

In an email dated June 14, Oliver "respectfully" declined to attend.

"We thank you for the offer to participate, but we are going to have to respectfully decline," an email to Crighton and commission co-chair Rep. Adrian Madaro said. "Look forward to the opportunity to catch up with staff after the meeting if there is anything necessary to follow up on."

The DPH spokesperson said "DPH is not a member of the Metropolitan Beaches Commission and has not traditionally attended the summit."