



State commission pushes for expanding access to state beaches in Boston area

By Paul Singer | May 12, 2023



New Department of Conservation and Recreation Commissioner Brian Arrigo speaks at event on Boston's Carson Beach to unveil report documenting steps needed to increase public access to state-owned beaches May 12, 2023.

“In the ten or so years leading up to just before COVID, the budget had been cut by almost two thirds of staffing and funding,” Mancini said. “Governor Healy’s new budget increases it over the recent years by 12%, which is really great.”

And some of the investments needed are not significant cash expenditures. For instance, the department says in the current fiscal year it has spent about \$200,000 buying beach wheelchairs and mobility mats for all of its waterfronts, one of the actions the report suggests.

Former Revere Mayor Brian Arrigo was tapped last month by Gov. Healey to run the Department of Conservation and Recreation, and he said in a statement, “As I finish my third week in this new role, I look forward to working with and learning from the perspectives of our visitors and partners like the Metropolitan Beaches Commission to ensure that our parks and beaches – especially our urban oases- are accessible to those of all abilities, incomes and language capabilities.”

Arrigo said Friday that he appreciates the 12% funding boost Healey provided in her budget request, but he said “it’ll be up to us to kind of prove that investment is with it.” Arrigo said the department now has to hire the staff and “do the work” to ensure that Massachusetts parks and beaches “are really welcoming places.”

The commission report lays out some specific near-term recommendations, including directing the department to announce plans to measure and increase diversity within the department, conduct an “accessibility audit” of ramps, walkways and bathrooms at all 12 beaches, and report back within 90 days on progress toward posting multi-lingual signage.

The commission also suggests revising rules to make it easier for diverse community groups to apply for permits to host events and activities on the beach.

The Department of Conservation and Recreation has not yet received the full report from the commission, and Arrigo made no specific commitments to any of the recommendations, but Mancini said the group has been working closely with the department in the development of the report and many of the recommendations are already underway.

A Massachusetts commission is calling on the Department of Conservation and Recreation to increase efforts to make public beaches around Boston more accessible to people of color, people with disabilities and people with limited English proficiency.

In a new report issued Friday, the Metropolitan Beaches Commission says the state’s beach budget has been dramatically underfunded for years, leading to a deep backlog of construction and maintenance requirements at the state beaches. But beyond major maintenance, the report also lays out a series of other recommendations that could significantly improve access, such as providing mats at each beach that allow a person to take a wheelchair down to the water and posting signage in multiple languages to make people who are not native English speakers feel welcome.

“The easiest, most cost effective thing to do would be simple multilingual signs that say, welcome to the beach in, say, like six languages,” said Chris Mancini, executive director of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay – which wrote the report for the Commission. “That’s making a statement. . . It just tells you, ‘Oh, I’m welcome here,’ literally with the words, but also with the symbol of simply making that effort.”

In a series of stories last year, The GBH News Center for Investigative Reporting documented how little access the general public has to much of the Bay State’s shoreline, in part because of legacy statues

that allow private property ownership of the beach all the way down to the low-tide line. In addition, much of the state’s shoreline is controlled by municipalities that impose parking and residency restrictions that dramatically limit beach access for non-residents. And GBH found that these restrictions particularly block people of color from getting access to the shore.

The new study produced by Save the Harbor/Save the Bay for the Metropolitan Beaches Commission only covers the 12 state-owned public beaches in the Boston area – from Nantasket Beach in Hull to King’s beach in Lynn with Revere Beach and Boston’s Carson Beach in between.

The Commission began its research focusing on racial inequities, but during public hearings, it became clear that physical disabilities and limited English proficiency were also key factors keeping people from the beaches.

“Language and physical ability were two others that really came up from the people in the hearings,” Mancini said. “These are areas, too, that we’re really interested in, [that] I think are really intersectional when it comes to that experience.”

Part of the problem has been resources. The report notes that the Department of Conservation and Recreation issued its own study in 2021 concluding that “Massachusetts state and local government per capita spending on parks and recreation was the lowest in the country.”