

Commission: Too Many Still Feel “Unwelcome” At Public Beaches

By State House News Service | May 12, 2023



Massachusetts state and local government per capita spending on parks and recreation was the lowest in the country and only 58 percent of the national average.

DCR is being targeted for significant investments in the current and ongoing state budget cycle, with a final budget for fiscal 2024 due by July 1.

The commission recommends that at its next public meeting, DCR share a list of its planned capital investments in the region’s public beaches in Lynn, Nahant, Revere, Winthrop, East Boston, South Boston, Dorchester, Quincy and Hull.

Recommendations dating back to 2014 and even 2007 also need to be fully implemented, the commission said, including establishing a baseline budget for metropolitan beaches and DCR, and scheduling capital investments that were authorized in an environmental bond law but never executed.

Other recommendations include a report from DCR on increasing diversity within the agency, continuing to solicit feedback on beach policies and procedures, translating outreach materials into languages spoken by non-English speakers, creating a guide on getting to public beaches using public transportation, funding free shuttles from public transit to and along larger beaches, and ensuring access to public hearings for people with disabilities.

Commission members also want DCR to report by this summer on ways to make permitting for beach events, programs and vendors more equitable and transparent, so new people and organizations can more easily participate. And commissioners want DCR to report soon on an “accessibility audit” of parking, ramps, walkways, and bathrooms on each of its Metropolitan Beaches, and plans to make those beaches fully accessible to people with disabilities.

The commission, which was created by the Legislature in 2006, also floated the idea of creating another similar commission with a focus on urban parks.

After taking feedback for 18 months, a state commission concluded in a new report that many people of color, individuals with disabilities, and non-native English speaking people feel “unwelcome and uncomfortable” on the string of public beaches that line the coast in and around Boston.

The Metropolitan Beaches Commission on Friday released a report on their work, which features calls for stronger leadership from the state Department of Conservation and Recreation and significant investments to address an “enormous backlog” of maintenance projects that also compromises equitable access to beaches.

“We found that our beaches have increasingly drawn residents who represent the rich diversity of our region,” commission leaders, including Sen. Brendan Crighton of Lynn and Rep. Adrian Madaro of East Boston, wrote. “However, more progress is needed before we can say they are truly inclusive. For many people of color, there is much work to be done before they will feel embraced, valued, and safe when they spend time at these important public amenities.”

The commission said its report was based on input gathered in recent months from people from the City of Boston, the region’s beachfront communities, and experts on environmental justice, disability resource infrastructure, and public

education and communication.

“These hearings and listening sessions confirmed and deepened our understanding of what we have seen and experienced in each of our communities: people’s perceptions of their beaches are shaped by their personal experiences and those of their friends and families,” the report said. “For people of color, people with disabilities and non-native English speakers, this has often meant feeling unwelcome and uncomfortable on their beaches, which are spectacular public resources that belong to them and their communities.”

With six commissioners in the past eight years, the Department of Conservation and Recreation “has lacked leadership continuity, clear direction, and accountability at the top, with DCR Commissioners too often making commitments that they may not be around to keep,” the report said.

Gov. Maura Healey last month named Brian Arrigo as DCR commissioner. The former mayor of coastal Revere is familiar with the role of public beaches, and the commission reported that it is counting on Healey “to set policy and hold the agency, and not just the Commissioner, accountable over time.”

The report’s authors cited a 2021 report on DCR by the UMass Donahue Institute which concluded that