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How is it that King's Beach, one of the region's most spectacular beaches, is still unswimmable?

By Yvonne Abraham | June 10, 2023



Gabrilie Tilley on Kings Beach on June 25, 2019.

LYNN — Nothing is certain except death, taxes, and elevated bacteria levels on King's Beach.

For decades, King's — which straddles Lynn and Swampscott — has been hazardous, a stormwater pipe pumping alarming levels of fecal matter across the sand and into the water. Bacteria levels here frequently are 800 times higher than is safe for swimming. The water is off limits more than one in every five days.

The red flags were up again most of last week, as a steady stream of water that looked innocent enough, but contained all manner of grossness, discharged onto the sand.

"It may look inviting, but this historic waterway ... contains bacteria from sewers and stormwater," read a sign near that section of the beach. "For your own safety, please don't swim or wade here!"

Lynn City Councilor Nicole McClain doesn't need a sign to keep her away. She grew up here, and King's is her place to "dream and think and just be myself." But she wouldn't dream of swimming here.

"I have never swum there," she said. "Something commonly known in my community is that you cannot get in that water, and when I see families in the water, I am always concerned."

King's remains one of the dirtiest beaches in Massachusetts because of aged underground pipes in Swampscott, and improper connections between sewer and stormwater pipes in Lynn (despite the fact

that the city spent millions separating them 20 years ago). That means the stormwater that finds its way onto the beach also contains human waste.

Both municipalities are under federal consent decrees mandating that they fix their pipes, but it's slow, painstaking and expensive work. State Senator Brendan Crighton, who has become a committed and effective leader on the cleanup, helped secure \$5 million in federal American Rescue Plan funds to boost their efforts.

But King's is as polluted as ever, according to Chris Mancini, head of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, which has been releasing water quality report cards putting King's at the bottom of the list for 17 years.

For far too long, Swampscott and Lynn have engaged in as much denialism and finger-pointing as pipe-fixing. And people with fewer advantages have paid the price: The water at King's — which already has a gorgeous, busy promenade — should be a stellar resource for the people of Lynn, especially for those without the resources to swim elsewhere.

"I dream of a day when every beach is safe for swimming damned near every day," said Bruce Berman, lead consultant for the Metropolitan Beaches Commission. "The right place to start is to prioritize an environmental justice community."

As is so often the case, the solution is as much a matter of politics as engineering. And here, there is finally movement. Thanks to Crighton's leadership, public outrage, and committed municipal

leaders, Lynn and Swampscott are finally pulling in the same direction when it comes to King's. The newish King's Beach Steering Committee is pushing for lasting solutions that will finally give their constituents the beach they deserve.

Even after all of the pipes are remediated, there will still be bacteria in the runoff that lands on the beach. So the committee has consulted engineers, and come up with a solution: Treating it with UV light to kill the bacteria. The system would cost \$25 million, and be up and running within a few years.

But they need the state's help to fund it. And though Environmental Affairs Secretary Rebecca Tepper has met with the King's folks, and her spokesperson says the department shares "the communities' desire for this beautiful public beach to be safe and accessible to the public," she hasn't embraced the UV proposal. Her department wants to make sure whatever solution everybody agrees on is the best way to fix King's. That will likely take far longer than anybody wants.

Governor Maura Healey's administration should make haste here. Water quality at King's didn't budge for eight years under Governor Charlie Baker, who lives seconds from the ickiness, in Swampscott. It sure as heck had better improve under a governor who has made environmental justice one of her signature issues.

Meantime, we ought to celebrate what's happening in the communities that are finally united in the cause.

"This is collaboration, and good government," Crighton said. "We finally have a game plan."