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MBC Addresses Coastal Climate Change Impact

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State and local leaders discussed the impact of climate change on beaches from Hull to Lynn as part of the state's Metropolitan Beaches Commission's (MBC) initial public hearing on Tuesday morning.

The meeting was expected to be the first of many to address flooding, sea level rise, and erosion along the metropolitan coastline.

"Our goal is to start the conversation from the goal of the Metropolitan Beaches Commission to prioritize the resilience and protection of metropolitan beaches from Nahant to Nantasket," said Chris Mancini, the Executive Director of Save the Harbor, Save the Bay.

Mancini said there are three main questions that are the focus for the communities during the initial stages of the beach commission hearings. Those include actions that are working now in the communities to address climate issues at the beaches, what are the gaps that need to be addressed, and what the communities would most like to see preserved along their beach and waterfronts.

State Senator Brendan Crighton, who co-chairs the Metropolitan Beaches Commission, said that when he first came to the State House, climate change and climate resiliency was an issue but not one that was necessarily at the top of everyone's agenda.

"But climate resiliency certainly is now, particularly for those of us who represent communities along the coast," said Crighton. Over the past weekend, Crighton said he went to the beach in Nahant and his son asked him if he could imagine the whole world covered in water, and Crighton said the idea wasn't that far-fetched.

"This is a serious issue, one that affects us not only now, but thinking about future generations and what exactly the beaches will look like," said Crighton. "Imagine Massachusetts with no beaches, it is certainly a troubling notion for all of us."

Julia Knisel from the state's office of Coastal Zone Management said there needs to be a collaborative effort among state and local agencies and organizations to address the coastal impacts of climate change.

Knisel noted that concrete seawalls line the Massachusetts coast, but that many of them are a century old.

"We need to look at the condition and height of the structures relative to current storm surge and conditions, and we need to look to the future, as well," said Knisel.

There also needs to be a closer look at the lowering of beaches in addition to beach erosion, as well, Knisel said.

Over the past decade, Knisel said the office of Coastal Zone Management has awarded over \$34 million in grants to local communities for coastal climate resiliency projects to retrofit current infrastructure and put in place shoreline and dune restoration projects.

Nick Connors of the DCR addressed how that department has pivoted in the past several years to address climate change issues. "DCR's mission is to protect, promote, and enhance our natural, cultural, and recreational resources," said Connors.

Chief among those natural resources are 27 saltwater beaches, many of which are in the Greater Boston area.

"Climate change is already exacerbating natural hazards and extreme weather events leading to new impacts that will affect the Commonwealth," said Connors. "This is such a critical issue that DCR recognized this and established a new office in early 2021 to develop and implement an agency framework that climate change considerations are included into the agency's initiatives and agency projects," said Connors.

The office works across the spectrum of federal, state, regional, and municipal partners to ensure that the DCR is implementing its core values and sustainable practices and resiliency across its infrastructure, assets, and resources, Connors said.

Catherine McCandless of the Boston Environment Department and Delaney Morris of the Boston Planning and Development Agency highlighted the recent planning efforts and proposed climate resiliency projects for Boston's beaches.

Those efforts include a project at Constitution Beach in East Boston, where officials are looking at a system of berms and dunes with a reinforced core that would reinforce the sandy beach and protect the Blue Line from flooding.

In discussing the Town of Hull's coastline resiliency efforts, town Conservation Director Christian Kahforst said it is important to listen to and understand local history.

“It really matters to get what locals understand and witnessed in the past,” said Krahforst.

Mancini said the beach commission will begin to zero in on more specifics as it continues to meet in the coming months.

“This is really the first conversation, the first meeting,” said Mancini.

Future meetings will take a deeper dive into individual communities and beaches, although he added that all of the communities and beaches will benefit from the more region-wide discussions.

Revere State Representative Jessica Giannino said the issues with flooding and resiliency in Revere stretch back to at least the Blizzard of ‘78. She also noted that as a city councilor, she would tour beach communities with the public works department as neighborhoods were flooded by storm surges.

In addition to maintaining the beaches for everyone to enjoy, Giannino said it’s important to maintain infrastructure for those who live close to the coast.

“It is also really important that people don’t lose their homes and that we invest in infrastructure that ensures that their homes are still there in 100 years,” said Giannino.

She also said that there needs to be an investment in vegetative berms and other natural solutions to rising sea levels, and not just concrete seawalls which don’t always last.

First Suffolk State Senator Nick Collins praised the advocacy work Save the Harbor, Save the Bay has done over the decades, and said he was looking forward to working with new DCR Director Brian Arrigo on resiliency efforts in the coming years. Collins did suggest that an increased investment from the DCR in providing more beach sand could provide some short-term relief for beach erosion.

High Bacteria Levels Lead to Local Beach Closings

It hasn’t been the best summer so far for local beachgoers. Following a rainy June and Fourth of July holiday, many popular local beaches, including Constitution Beach in East Boston and Revere Beach, were closed to swimming due to high bacteria levels.

As of Tuesday, July 11, Swim at Your Own Risk signs because of the high bacteria levels were posted at Kings Beach and Lynn Beach in Lynn, and Donovan’s Beach in Winthrop.

The 53 beaches closed statewide early this week were actually an improvement over last week, when the heavy holiday weekend rains led to over 70 closures. Revere Beach and Short Beach in

Revere and Constitution Beach in East Boston were closed to swimming for a time last week, but were reopened to swimming this week.

“The Town of Winthrop conducts weekly tests of the water quality of 5 beaches in Winthrop for levels of Enterococci which is an indicator of fecal pollution and possible enteric pathogens,” Winthrop health officials stated. “When the level exceeds 104 MPN (most probable number)/100 mL, the Town of Winthrop closes the beach. High levels are usually due to heavy rainfall and usually return to normal levels after a retest.”

In Revere, DCR and Revere DPW test the water quality weekly during the summer for a specific type of bacteria; when bacteria levels get too high, the water can become unsafe for swimming or ingestion.

The high bacteria levels typically happen due to high rain events or circumstances that lead to substantial run-off discharging into waterways.

The water will continue to be tested weekly.

Swimming or ingesting contaminated water could result in symptoms like nausea, diarrhea, stomach cramps, chills or fever. Revere officials stated that if anyone is concerned about their potential exposure to contaminated water when signage is posted to contact their healthcare provider.

To minimize illness and injury associated with swimming, and to notify the public about the quality of beach water, the state’s Department of Public Health collects beach water quality data from local health departments and the DCR. All public and semi-public bathing beaches in Massachusetts are monitored for fecal indicator bacteria (FIB), and on occasion, harmful algae. Monitoring occurs during the beach season, which begins when the school year finishes in mid-June and ends during the weekend of Labor Day.