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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.”