

East Boston

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Eastie's Constitution Beach Scores High Marks on Water Quality Report Card

With summer in full swing and beach goers enjoying sun, surf and sand Save the Harbor/Save the Bay released its annual report on the water quality at Constitution Beach in East Boston.

According to Save the Harbor/Save the Bay's Annual Beach Water Report Card, Constitution Beach scored an A+ and the beach's water quality increased eight points in the summer of 2020 since posting one of its lowest grades during the summer of 2019.

Constitution Beach scored a 98 percent last summer after posting a 90 percent in 2019. In 2018 Constitution Beach scored a 94 percent; a 95 percent in 2017; a 96 percent in 2016; and an 89 percent in 2015—the beaches lowest grade in six years.

Overall Constitution Beach's six year average for water quality is 94 percent.

Rainfall can have a significant impact on beach water quality and can vary greatly from year to year. Changes in the summer storm intensity and frequency can often explain the variations.

Save the Harbor/Save the Bay's Bruce Berman said 2020 was a relatively dry year, with only a few large summer storms and relatively fewer wet weather impacts, hence the increase in score at Eastie's beach.

The drop in some scores at beaches like Constitution Beach in 2019 was not surprising. Though places like Lynn, Swampscott and Boston continue to track down and correct old combined outfall sewer connections and broken pipes, it is a slow go and there are no easy fixes.

Old combined outfall hookups mix stormwater and sewage together after a big storm and pump it out into the harbor.

Berman has long said that there are two ways to fix an urban beach problem. One way is to sever every pipe that goes into the beach like the city did in South Boston years ago but that is very expensive.

The other way to ensure cleaner water is for residents to look at their own water and sewer hook ups and make sure they are not old hook ups that lead out into storm water drains.

However, things are a lot better than they were 25 years ago when the Deer Island treatment facility was in disarray and a broken outflow just off the harbor beaches was pumping 200 million gallons of raw sewage back into the water after heavy storms.

Save the Harbor/ Save the Bay is also concerned about the accuracy of the beach flagging and posting protocols, where bacteria testing triggers swimming advisories.

Berman said one problem is that postings are always a day late because beach managers must wait up to 36 hours to obtain test results. Beach water quality may have already changed significantly during this period, so the prior day's tests often do not reflect current conditions.

Moreover, in 2019, The Department of Public Health made additional changes to the beach posting and flagging protocols, which has resulted in additional days where beaches are unnecessarily posted with swimming advisories when they are in fact safe for swimming.

“While Save the Harbor recognizes the importance of protecting public health, the current system is often inaccurate and sometimes overly restrictive,” said Berman. “Over the coming months we plan to work with consultant Kelly Coughlin of Stony Brook Partners, and with the Department of Conservation and Recreation, the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, MADEP, USEPA, and MADPH to develop new rainfall thresholds and protocols to improve flagging and posting accuracy.”

Weekly water quality testing at Boston's regional beaches began in late May of 2020. Additional daily testing of Constitution Beach, King's Beach,

Malibu Beach, Tenean Beach, and Wollaston Beach began in early June and concluded on Labor Day weekend, September 6, 2020.

These beach safety scores are calculated as the percent of water samples that comply with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health single sample limit for bacteria, a straightforward way to evaluate seasonal beach water quality and potential impacts on public health. The Department of Public