

King's Beach defies clean up

Lynn, Swampscott tackling sewage pollution

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ITEM STAFF

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SWAMPSCOTT — King's Beach has been the source of consternation for decades, as Swampscott and Lynn residents who hope to utilize their local outdoor spaces are thwarted by twin stormwater outfalls contaminated by sewage.

An annual water-quality report card for 2020 released by environmental organization Save the Harbor/Save the Bay on July 4 showed

that the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)-owned beach was safe for swimming on only 70 percent of the days in which it was tested for bacteria, the lowest score in the area.

"King's Beach has such a specific problem, and it's so blatant and obvious. You have almost a mile of public swimming beach that is unusable a lot of the time," said Save the Harbor Executive Director Chris Mancini, also a Swampscott resident. "It's clearly to me an environmental justice issue. You have one of the most diverse and dense cities that has one of the worst water qualities in the metro region."

There are two outfalls from Stacy's Brook, one in Lynn and one in Swampscott, adjacent to each other on the beach at the city line. Both outfalls have been shown time and time again to be contaminated with sewage, despite the fact that sewer wastewater from both communities

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is supposed to be transported in the pipes to the Lynn wastewater treatment facility.

A 2018 report released by Save the Harbor and the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) determined that in dry weather, the Lynn outfall has approximately five times more flow than the Swampscott outfall; in wet weather, Swampscott's flow is higher. Both outfall barrels contain bacteria from dilute sanitary waste.

King's Beach has unique issues stemming from both the Swampscott and Lynn sewer systems. In Swampscott, the more than 100-year-old clay pipes are cracked and broken in many places, allowing water to seep through the earth from untreated sewage pipes to the stormwater pipes that flow directly to Stacy's Brook.

Lynn, on the other hand, has a different problem, in that it has a combined sewer system, which transports both sewage wastewater and stormwater in the same pipes to the treatment facility. During periods of heavy rain, the amount of water in the pipes exceeds their capacity, and flows into a combined sewer overflow (CSO) which travels, again, to the outfalls at Stacy's Brook.

In 2015, Swampscott entered into a consent decree from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requiring it to pay a \$65,000 civil penalty for violating the Clean Water Act and create a plan to fix the pollution problem at Stacy's Brook.

"They (the EPA) weren't going to tell us how to solve it, they just wanted it solved," said the town's Department of Public Works Director Gino Cresta.

In January 2017, the town began phase 1A of a five-year, \$10 million sewer rehabilitation project, moving neighborhood-by-neighborhood through the system to repair and replace aging pipes. Cresta said that the



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A recent report made by environmental organization Save the Harbor/Save the Bay found that King's Beach was safe for swimming on only 70 percent of the days in which it was tested for bacteria.

current phase, 1C, will be finished around October, leaving only 1D left in the current rehabilitation plan. After that, the next steps have yet to be determined.

The good news, according to engineering firm Kleinfelder, which the town contracted with for the project, is that in the areas that have been finished, sewage contamination has been all but eliminated.

"Particularly on Stetson Avenue, where the pre-construction sampling had a bacterial count of right around 20,000, it started to slowly drop to where it's under 1,000 as of post-construction," said Senior Project Manager Cecilia Carmona in a presentation to the town's Select Board in March.

Town Administrator Sean Fitzgerald said that without help from the state and federal level, as well as from Lynn, the project will fall short.

"This is a regional issue," Fitzgerald said. "It really needs to be addressed as a shared priority. Swampscott is committed to solving this problem, but it should not take 20 years for us to solve."

For Lynn's part, the city was first sued by the EPA

in 1976 for violating the Clean Water Act, and the agency required the city to separate its stormwater and wastewater pipes. It took until the 2000s for this project to be completed in East Lynn.

The EPA filed subsequent consent decrees against Lynn in 2001 and 2017 requiring the city to clean up West Lynn and the downtown area. The 2017 decree also required Lynn to pay a \$125,000 civil penalty for again violating the Clean Water Act and failing to comply with a previous decree.

Last year, Lynn began work on a \$200 million project to complete the sewer separation, including constructing 15 miles of new piping. However, like Swampscott, the city says it doesn't have the resources to clean up King's Beach once and for all.

"To date, there has been no available funding from the federal or state government for projects or more exploratory work to minimize the effects of overflows," Lynn Water and Sewer Commissioner Bob Fennell said.

Mayor Thomas M. McGee, who as a state senator chaired the Metropolitan Beaches Commission

and secured a \$20 million bond bill to devote to beach improvements in Lynn and elsewhere in Greater Boston, said that, as of yet, none of that money has been spent.

"There are a lot of pieces to the puzzle to make these beaches clean and make our harbors and our coastline clean," McGee said. "As we've been able to address other issues in the region, the timing is right to take a look at this and find out what's causing the ongoing pollution."

State Senator Brendan Crighton (D-Lynn) agreed, saying that there needed to be collaboration between the local, state and federal levels of government.

"The administration only has so much capacity to borrow money, and they pick and choose priorities," Crighton said. "It's our hope that with the data going back many years at this point, there's a strong argument to be made about public health and environmental justice that whether it's money authorized in the bond or potential federal money coming for infrastructure, it's our hope to get this moving."

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