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Report says Swampscott's King's Beach often unsafe for swimming



King's Beach deemed unsafe for swimming more than one in five days last year according to Save the Harbor/Save the Bay. (Julia Hopkins)

SWAMPSCOTT — A report released Sunday by an environmental advocacy group revealed that the waters at King's Beach were unsafe for swimmers on more than one in five days last year.

Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, an organization that promotes investments in clean water in Boston Harbor, the Boston Harbor Islands and Massachusetts' public beaches, released its annual water quality report card this weekend, which scores beaches using monitoring data from the 2020 beach season.

"While we are delighted with the progress that we have made on most of the region's public beaches, we are disappointed to report that ... King's Beach in Lynn and Swampscott (are) still unsafe for swimming more than one out of every five days in 2020," said Chris Mancini, the organization's executive director. "We are particularly concerned about the situation at King's Beach, where filthy, bacteria-laden discharges from both Lynn and Swampscott at Stacey Brook continue to threaten public health."

Most beaches in the region were tested weekly beginning in late May; King's Beach, among other beaches

with frequent water-quality issues, were tested daily from early June to Labor Day weekend.

Beach safety scores are calculated as the percent of water samples that comply with Massachusetts Department of Public Health single-sample limit for bacteria. King's Beach received a score of 70 percent, the lowest in the region, with a six-year average of 79 percent. The average score for the region was 93 percent, an improvement over 2019, which had an average score of 89 percent.

Five beaches, including Revere Beach and Winthrop Beach, received perfect scores.

Scores can be influenced significantly by rainfall. According to the report, 2020 was a relatively dry year, which may have influenced some of the scores. Because of this, Save the Harbor prefers to look at the six-year average scores.

"Our kids and families deserve better. Today we are calling on the Lynn Water and Sewer Commission and the Swampscott Water and Sewer Department to work together with Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, state and federal regulators and the

community to save King's Beach, which is a critical recreational asset to Lynn's kids and families," Mancini said. "This is an environmental justice issue in a diverse, dense city where healthy green and blue spaces are at a premium."

Both Swampscott and Lynn have spent millions of dollars cleaning up King's Beach. Local officials in the past have attributed much of the bacteria to breaches in Swampscott sewer pipes leading to Stacey Brook, causing discharge of partially-treated sewage into the ocean.

In 2017, Swampscott received orders from the Environmental Protection Agency requiring it to make improvements to Stacey Brook. The town is currently in the midst of an over-\$10 million project to do so. Bruce Berman, Save the Harbor's director of strategy and communications, said that another concern is inaccuracy of beach flagging and posting of swimming advisories. Beach managers must wait up to 36 hours for bacterial-testing results, meaning that postings are always a day late, and often the conditions have changed by the time the public is aware.

In addition, DPH made changes to posting and flagging protocols in 2019, resulting in days when beaches are unnecessarily posted with swimming advisories when they are 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.

While Save the Harbor plans to work with state organizations to improve flagging and posting accuracy in the future, they recommended that beachgoers rely on common sense when swimming and use the multi-year average safety ratings to help decide where it is safe to swim.