

Dorchester Reporter

“The News and Values Around the Neighborhood”

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Study: Water quality improved at Dorchester beaches last year

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According to the non-profit Save the Harbor/Save the Bay’s annual report released last Sunday, water quality improved last year at all Dorchester beaches. In 2020, the overall safety rating for regional beaches managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation was 93 percent overall, an increase from the 2019 score of 89 percent.

In Dorchester, Malibu Beach scored at 91 percent, up from the previous year’s 83. Savin Hill improved to 89 percent from 79 percent and Tenean rose to 79 percent from 67 percent.

For the past two years,

Tenean was rated the least-safe beach for swimming in the Metro Boston area.

Overall, five of the region’s 15 public beaches scored a perfect 100 percent: South Boston’s Pleasure Bay, City Point, and Carson Beaches, and Revere and Winthrop beaches.

M Street Beach in South Boston scored 94 percent, down from 100 percent in 2019.

Weekly water quality testing at Boston’s regional beaches began in late May 2020. Additional daily testing of Constitution Beach, King’s Beach, Malibu Beach, Tenean Beach, and Wollaston Beach began in early June and concluded on Sep. 6,

2020. The scores reflect the percent of samples that complied with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health’s single sample limit for bacteria.

“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 Tenean Beach in Dorchester and King’s Beach in Lynn and Swampscott were still unsafe for swimming more than one out of every five days in 2020,” said Chris Mancini, executive director of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay.

According to the report, rainfall can have a significant impact on beach water quality and



For the past two years, Tenean Beach in Dorchester has been rated the least-safe beach for swimming due to water quality in the Metro Boston area.

Bill Forry photo

can vary greatly from year to year, and 2020 was a relatively dry year, with only a few large summer storms and relatively few wet weather impacts.

Bruce Berman, director of strategy and communications for Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, said he is concerned about the accuracy of the beach flagging and posting protocols, where bacteria testing triggers swimming advisories.

The report identified a “critical weakness” with the way state officials alert the public to potential water quality hazards at the beaches. Currently, beachgoers are signaled by a red or blue flag flown from lifeguard stations at the beaches. (Blue means safe, red means unsafe.)

Berman said that postings are always a day late

because beach managers must wait up to 36 hours to obtain test results from the lab. In that lag time, water quality could have already changed significantly, so the prior day’s tests often do not reflect current conditions.

“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.”

One potential solution that officials have considered in the past is called “modeling,” a system that is based on how much storm water it takes to make a beach dirty. When beach managers anticipate that level of rain, a red flag would go up as a precaution.

In the interim, Save the Harbor/Save the Bay urges beachgoers to “rely on common sense when swimming after summer storms and to use the multi-year average safety ratings to help decide when and where it is safe to swim.”