

The Daily Item

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BY ALLYSHA DUNNIGAN | December 8, 2021

Commission Weighs Increased Handicapped Access At Lynn & Nahant Beaches



On Tuesday, November 30, the Metropolitan Beaches Commission and Save the Harbor/Save the Bay convened a Virtual Public Hearing focused on improving access for people with disabilities on the Commonwealth's public beaches in Lynn, Nahant, Revere, Winthrop, East Boston, South Boston, Dorchester, Quincy and Hull.

The Metropolitan Beaches Commission and Save the Harbor/Save the Bay held a virtual public hearing last week, focused on improving access for people with disabilities on public beaches in the state, including in Lynn, Nahant and Revere.

Co-chaired by state Sen. Brendan Crighton (D-Lynn) and Rep. Adrian Madaro of East Boston, the hearing included testimonies from local officials, people who work with others who are disabled, and people with disabilities or those speaking on behalf of someone they know who is disabled.

From his time spent working as a staffer, commissioner and now Chair of the Metropolitan Beaches Commission, Crighton, said beach access and looking at ways to improve this has always been a top priority.

“I’m so grateful to the folks who are working now to really highlight and prioritize this issue

and come up with recommendations to hopefully improve access for everyone,” Crighton said. “Making sure that the physical aspect is there and that we are reaching every resident in the Commonwealth to highlight these important resources in areas of recreation is so important.”

Established in 2006, the Metropolitan Beaches Commission — which is led and managed by Save the Harbor/Save the Bay — works to make findings and recommendations to the legislature and the Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR) on ways to improve the metropolitan region’s public beaches.

The hopes of this public hearing, Executive Director of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay Chris Mancini said, is to help better understand the challenges facing people with disabilities on the metropolitan beaches.

“We are looking forward to working together with DCR — and all of you here today — to develop strategies to improve access to these spectacular urban natural resources for everyone,” Mancini said.

Andrea Gayle-Bennett, a Lynn resident and third junior vice commander of the Disabled American Veterans Department of Massachusetts, said that when accessibility to the beach is limited for those with physical disabilities, it turns them into spectators instead of participants.

“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.”

Boston’s Disabilities Commissioner Kristen McCosh uses a power wheelchair because of a disability she acquired as a teenager.

As someone who leads Boston’s overall effort to ensure accessibility and inclusion for persons with disabilities, McCosh highlighted the importance of going to the next step to make sure that people with disabilities are included in every aspect of life.

“We don’t all only strive for meeting bare minimum requirements. We strive for ideal accessibility, which really goes from accessibility to inclusion.” said McCosh.

This testimony, Crighton said, will help shape necessary improvements on the Commonwealth’s public beaches to ensure that these resources are always accessible for all.

Chris Van Buskirk State House News Service

December 1, 2021

Public beach access for people with disabilities focus of hearings to improve equity, inclusion

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.”