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YEAR OF THE BEACH | GLOBE EDITORIAL
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Revival vs. storm drains

WOLLASTON BEACH still has an unfinished look to it, as a construction company struggles to finish repaving Quincy Shore Drive and renovating the sidewalks and rain shelters along the beach. Last weekend, though, one of the most hopeful developments in years brought a festive atmosphere to the area. The volunteer group Friends of Wollaston Beach, formed last year, was holding a kite-flying festival, an indication that the neighborhood is taking ownership of a neglected resource.

The goal of the group is to "bring people back to the beach," said Kristen Awed Ladas, the president. "It had a stigma, but we have seen improvement." As if on cue, a worker for the state Department of Conservation and Recreation picked up trash a short distance away.

That was just a coincidence. "We pick up litter almost every day at Wollaston Beach," DCR spokeswoman Wendy Fox said in an interview later. There wasn't much trash last Saturday. Not many people were on the beach, either. It was a cloudy day, and the beach doesn't formally open until June 16, when lifeguards begin work.

But there are other reasons why people stay away. Wollaston Beach suffers from its location. It stretches 1.5 miles along Quincy Shore Drive, a four-lane highway. The beach is a popular spot for young people, some of whom are less than fastidious about trash disposal. Speeding cars wall off the beach from the residential streets of North Quincy. Calm waters attract swimmers, but contamination is often a problem. Any improvement plan for the beach must address trash, traffic, and water quality. Trash is easy; regular pickup and plenty of barrels

will take care of it. The highway is more difficult. The department considered narrowing the road to one lane each way, as it was in the 1920s, but this would have clogged traffic on side streets. Instead, as part of the \$7.6 million renovation, the street and parking areas were narrowed by 3 feet to allow a wider sidewalk and the 14 traffic lights are being sequenced to keep vehicles to a 30-mile-per-hour speed limit along the Quincy Shore straightaway. The state and local police need to make sure this speed limit is enforced. If it is, frequent crosswalks, combined with the traffic lights, will get beachgoers across the street safely.

Once they get to Quincy Bay, though, they may not want to go in, because the water quality issue is the trickiest of all. Eight storm drains empty onto the shallow bay just off the beach. Even though the drains, built decades ago, are reserved for storm water runoff, there's enough leakage from the sewers and enough nasty material, such as dog droppings, in the runoff to make bacteria counts unhealthy after rainfalls. The currents in the bay are too sluggish to move foul water out to sea quickly.

A report by the Metropolitan Beaches Commission, released in April, found that despite the billions spent on the Boston Harbor cleanup, Wollaston Beach was unsafe for swimming 19 percent of the time in 2005, the last year for which DCR had compiled complete figures. It had the worst record of DCR beaches in the Boston area.

"Whoever constructed the drainage wasn't thinking of the beachgoers," said Quincy City Council President Douglas Gutro.

The City of Quincy has spent \$30 million over the last decade to upgrade

the sewerage system in the area. Quincy deserves much credit for a persistent investment in clean water. A project at the southern end of the beach remains to be completed.

One way to reassure people about the water is to devise a better test. With existing technology, it takes a day to grow bacteria from a water sample to determine water purity. Conditions in the bay could change while the water is in a test tube. The US Environmental Protection Agency is trying to develop a near-instantaneous method. Quicker results would assure beachgoers that they could trust the blue flag that DCR posts when swimming is allowed.

The effect of the Quincy drainage work won't be known for a couple of years. But the beach will look much better once the DCR project is completed. The department needs to keep the pressure on to make sure the contractor finishes by early summer.

Beachgoers may be responding to all the beneficial activity. At the kite festival, Arthur Erickson, who has lived near the beach for 57 years, recalled that he had just seen someone pick up a bit of litter. "That's the first time in recent memory," he said.

The Friends of Wollaston Beach is planning a volleyball tournament July 29 and a "Wolly Walk" on Aug. 18. More programming like this will create a constituency for beach maintenance and further improvements on shore and in the water. If the Friends stay active, there'll be no backsliding allowed on Wollaston Beach. ■