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YEAR OF THE BEACH | GLOBE EDITORIAL
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Not so honky-tonk anymore

REVERE BEACH was established as a state-owned recreation spot in 1896, and fans tout this 3-mile stretch of coast as the nation's first public beach. As time wore on, the area alongside the beach endured decades of economic ups and downs, and what was once an oceanfront resort acquired a honky-tonk vibe.

Now the beach is in flux once again. Luxury condominiums are going up on the land side of Revere Beach Boulevard. Such development isn't just part of the relentless tide of upscaling that has swept across so much of Greater Boston. It's also a result of an aggressive effort to bring life back to the beach.

A recent Metropolitan Beaches Commission report held up Revere Beach as a model for revitalizing beaches. And it is -- though others can only copy it up to a point.

Crucial to the effort is the Revere Beach Partnership, a nonprofit created in 2001 to raise money for improvements and programming. The organization's most popular event is a sand castle festival. (This year's event begins July 6.) In conjunction with city agencies, local businesses, and nonprofits, the partnership has also promoted a farmer's market, beach concerts, and other activities.

The beach also gets a lot of use from day to day. One recent Friday, sunbathers stretched out here and there on the sand. A few teenage boys hung out under a pavilion. Customers of nearby Kelly's Roast Beef ate on the seawall. Artist Paula Engman, a retired photo retoucher, painted a watercolor picture of seagulls. She says the number of visitors has risen over the course of her three decades in Revere. And that's fine with her.

"The more people there are," Engman said, "the more people there are to paint."

Physical improvements have helped. In 1992, 800,000 cubic yards of sand were brought in to replenish the beach. Right now, the Department of Conservation and Recreation, which owns the beach, is deep into building roughly \$9 million in improvements: better storm drainage; historic-looking lighting; and the replacement of angle parking along the seawall with a wide promenade for walkers and joggers. The construction area is an obstacle course now, but the project is due to be completed this fall.

Revere Beach will still have other troubles. Even though prison details pick up trash, more washes up on the shore or is left behind by

visitors. Water quality is occasionally a problem, too. Revere Mayor Thomas Ambrosino said contamination is the result of water and sewer discharges from Lynn. Joe Orfant, chief of DCR's bureau of project design and management, couldn't say for sure what the source might be, but said the improved storm drain system at Revere Beach might help.

Furthermore, in a public hearing last year, beach users complained about vagrants and gang activity on the beach. Ambrosino says state earmarks for special police details along the beach are improving public safety.

But state money might not flow quite so freely in the future; Revere Beach lost an influential friend when former state Senate president Robert Travaglini, whose district included the beach, resigned earlier this year. Options for locally generated funds have complications, too. City officials would like to see meters along the parallel parking spaces next to the new promenade; the receipts could be used for beach improvements. DCR currently has no meters on any of its parkways, said department spokeswoman Wendy Fox. If it did, the revenues would go to the state general fund, and redirecting them would take a change in the law. But she also

said DCR commissioner Rick Sullivan is open to discussing the issue. He should be. Modest parking fees would be an easy way to raise money.

In any case, the progress at Revere Beach is undeniable. But following the Revere Beach model would be tough for fans of more obscure beaches in the DCR system. Replicating all of Revere Beach's programming elsewhere, said partnership executive director Lilly Guido, would cost \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year.

And that's just one barrier. Consider the plight of Short Beach, which occupies 100 yards of coast right at the Winthrop line. Walls on either side of nearby Winthrop Parkway make the beach hard to get to. Instead of soft powdery sand, there are pebbles covering the much of the beach -- and gobs of seaweed and litter lying atop the pebbles.

DCR will seek bids this fall on planned improvements, such as upgraded access ramps, Orfant says. But the department struggles to provide the level of daily maintenance most beachgoers

want. And a "funny little neighborhood beach," as Orfant called Short Beach, may never get as much public devotion as one in a more conspicuous spot.

A devoted following is vital to making a beach attractive and enjoyable. "It's not going to happen with just one person or two people," Guido said. "You need the whole community." That is the challenge not just in Revere, but at all of DCR's beaches. ■

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