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YEAR OF THE BEACH | GLOBE EDITORIAL
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Cleaner waters off Southie

THE CITY-RUN L Street Bathhouse stretches like a 1,000-foot-long net along the South Boston shoreline. It's no simple matter, however, to attract new users to the historic community center, despite offerings that range from well-equipped training rooms to a swimmable Boston Harbor beach just steps from its back door.

The South Boston waterfront is chock-a-block with joggers, strollers, and sunbathers. But the stigma of harbor pollution has receded slowly -- even though waders in chest-deep water now report consistent sightings of their own feet. The area suffered symbolic setbacks in 2002 and 2003, when the group Save the Harbor/Save the Bay had to cancel its annual swim from L Street to Carson Beach due to concerns over high levels of bacteria in the water. In 2005, pollution kept swimmers out of the water for six days along the same South Boston stretch.

Although confidence is returning, the entire system still suffers from a 24-hour lag in water quality testing by the state Department of

Conservation and Recreation and the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority. A come-hither blue flag flying on a Boston Harbor beach today actually indicates yesterday's water quality. And the same holds true for the red warning flags. Faster testing would result in greater public confidence.

Willingness of people to get wet is the true measure of success of Boston Harbor beaches like L Street or the abutting M Street beach, which is owned and managed by DCR. North and south of the city, water temperatures -- not contaminant levels -- determine how many people go swimming on a hot day. Boston beaches still aspire to that goal.

Still, South Boston has benefited greatly from the \$4.5 billion cleanup of Boston Harbor. And the beaches from Castle Island to Columbia Point should only get cleaner in the coming years. In September, the MWRA will begin boring a 2.1 mile long tunnel, at a cost of \$145 million, to collect the combined sewage and storm water overflow that can pollute the beach after

rainfalls. The project, including a small pumping station, is expected to be at full operation in 2011. The likely result, predicts MWRA director Fred Laskey, will be "the cleanest urban beach in the country." Peace of mind should arrive with a system designed to weather a 25-year storm event.

"This is the retail part of the clean-up," says Laskey. "This is where the customer touches the water."

Back in the late 19th century, public officials also urged people to touch the water at an earlier L Street bathhouse, but for the purpose of ablutions, not recreation. In 1931, former mayor James Michael Curley, whose name adorns the current L Street community center, dedicated the bathhouse as a "monument to health." Today, the so-called "L" boasts a running club, cardio workout rooms, and boxing club. The coed gym and spinning rooms can get crowded. But swimmers are still relatively rare along the separate men's and women's sections of the beach, where wooden fences extending into the bay offer privacy. Only

the occasional boater traveling near shore is likely to know if someone missed the signs prohibiting nude bathing.

"The young professionals don't get this place," says Richard DeSimone, 60, a lifelong South Boston resident. DeSimone and other L Street regulars recall the beach of decades past, when body-building contests and horseshoe tossing tournaments helped to distract players waiting hours for their turn on a handball court. The regulars praise their "Southie sanctuary," but they also want to see greater use of the beach and facilities, especially by older teens who might otherwise drift into trouble.

"This place changed lives," says 38-year-old Charlie LoGrasso of South Boston, a former Golden Gloves light-heavyweight title holder.

Whether inside the fence at L Street or outside on DCR's M Street beach, the demand for more and better programming is a common theme. Many local residents learned to swim on these beaches when a dip was downright risky. Now that the water is swimmable on nearly all but a few days after a rainstorm, they don't understand why there is so little to entice people into the water. Joint programming by the city's community centers and the DCR would be an economical way to quiet the criticism.

L Street director Freddy Ahern, a former hockey pro, says the recent addition of physical conditioning classes for youths are starting to bring in a new generation. He is also planning a membership drive for new residents to the neighborhood, to coincide with the addition of upgraded gym equipment.

"We don't have the bells and whistles that the shiny places have," acknowledges Ahern.

Maybe. But the fancier health clubs in the area charge more per month than L Street's \$50 annual membership fee. And they'll never boast a swimming beach where even the occasional harbor seal pulls up for a little rest and relaxation. ■