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YEAR OF THE BEACH | GLOBE EDITORIAL
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Round and round at Nantasket

OF THE 14 public beaches under the control of the state Department of Conservation and Recreation, Nantasket Beach in Hull is the crown jewel. Yet the setting for this 1.3-mile-long gem is rusting, and some of the prongs are being held in place by duct tape.

People have been going gaga over Nantasket Beach since the 19th century, when Bostonians flocked to its stately seaside resort hotels and their vivid towers, gables, and balconies. A "Plymouth County History" in 1884 describes how Nantasket's "cool and bracing breath of the sea dispels the parching heats of the day." Side-wheel steamboats delivered 2 million visitors in 1921. Today, middle-aged Bostonians still reminisce on the Web about past summers spent at Nantasket in the '50s and '60s. Devotees don't let go easily. Consider the Friends of the Paragon Carousel, a group that raises money to restore and

operate an 80-year-old merry-go-round in Nantasket more than two decades after the demolition of the surrounding Paragon Park amusement center.

Much of the luster is gone. Yet people keep arriving -- to the tune of about 20,000 on a hot July day, according to DCR district manager Susan Kane.

How one experiences the beach depends, in part, on where one enters it after jockeying for one of the roughly 2,000 publicly or privately operated parking spots. Some visitors reach the beach by way of new stairways. Others descend carefully on the crumbling concrete. Near the bandstand toward the southern end of the reservation, a handrail leading to the beach is nearly rusted away. Its presumably jagged end has been wrapped in a thick wad of duct tape. The main bathhouse is open but gives an initial appearance of abandonment due to

boarded-up windows. And once inside the men's area, there are no doors on most of the changing rooms. Yet other visitors should be pleased by the recent renovations of the two comfort stations at either ends of the state beach.

"It's sort of halfway," says Hull selectwoman Joan Meschino, who served on the Metropolitan Beaches Commission that recently analyzed the needs of the DCR beach system that extends from Nahant to Nantasket. Meschino's assessment is dead-on. She points out sun shelters that provide shade for young day campers who come to the beach. Yet DCR offers no youth programs for the children. There are ample trash receptacles along the beach. But DCR's anemic maintenance budget makes it a struggle to keep them emptied. The restrooms at the main bathhouse are supposed to stay open until 8 p.m. on weekends. But that is no guarantee they will be, says Meschino. While she stresses that

many DCR employees do their best with what they have, she rates the entire operation as "wholly uninspired."

DCR's Kane understands the frustration. Soon, she says, visitors will find improvements to the playground, the addition of baby changing stations, and perhaps swimming lessons and a spray park for kids . On Wednesday, DCR kicked off what she hopes will be a series of nature walks along the beach with coastal experts. But most programs, such as Sunday concerts for seniors, are still supported by the Town of Hull or local businesses. No part of the Nantasket operation seems immune from the "half-way" headaches. DCR has made \$8.5 million in improvements over the past three years to about 3,000 feet of the mile-long seawall, which required the installation of

a rocky revetment that many beach users consider an eyesore. But further work depends not only on technical analysis and the availability of capital dollars, but on the completion of a master plan for the entire Nantasket Beach reservation.

Transportation problems also vex the beach. Although a commuter ferry operates between Boston and Hull, there is no weekend service. Weekend runs wouldn't solve much anyway, because there is no consistent public transportation along the roughly 6 -mile stretch between the town pier, where the ferry arrives, and the DCR portion of the beach. One good solution would be to return to the days of the Nantasket steamers and bring ferries to the underused pier that sits in the bay directly across the main road

leading into the reservation. That might even allow DCR to replace portions of its current parking lot with green space.

Six DCR-owned buildings that line the reservation -- some empty or half-empty -- along Nantasket Avenue are also emblematic. Kane envisions a visitor's center there. Meanwhile, says Meschino, there is no place on the beach even to rent a bike. If DCR can't create good leasing opportunities for this waterfront property, they should consider transferring control to Hull town officials who are eager to try.

Nantasket brims with potential. But no matter how one approaches the beach, it is still half-baked. ■