

The Boston Globe

Beach bummer

Improvements are underway, but the wheels turn ever so slowly

By Robert Preer, Globe Correspondent | May 17, 2007

The spotlight this spring is on conditions at the state's 14 harbor beaches, including Wollaston Beach in Quincy and Nantasket Beach in Hull. A special commission last month criticized management of the beaches and recommended changes.

The good news for beach goers is that some of the recommendations are already being implemented, signaling the possibility that conditions at the two popular beaches south of Boston will improve in time for summer.

The Metropolitan Beaches Commission -- which includes legislators, local officials, and members of advocacy groups -- recommended that the state Department of Conservation and Recreation publicize its maintenance schedules, assign an official to oversee each beach, and establish ties with community groups that advocate for the beaches.

In the last several weeks, the Department of Conservation and Recreation has set up a web site for posting maintenance schedules. Seasonal maintenance workers were hired a month earlier than usual. And last weekend, hundreds of volunteers helped clean beaches and parks across the state.

Nantasket and Wollaston are almost mirror-image opposites in their assets and deficits.

The water at Nantasket is very clean, and the beach has not been closed because of pollution in years, but some of the facilities are badly in need of renovation and repairs. Wollaston is getting a major amenities upgrade, but it has been plagued by pollution. In 2005, high bacteria counts were recorded 40 times during the summer.

Wollaston and Nantasket share another problem: a lack of routine maintenance. "Problems range from inadequate trash removal to insufficient cleaning of sand to an inability to undertake basic repairs . . . in a timely way," the beaches commission reported.

Soon after taking office this year, Ian Bowles, the state's secretary of environmental affairs, sought advice from state Senator Michael W. Morrissey of Quincy on managing the Boston Harbor beaches.

"It's very simple," Morrissey recalled telling him. "Cut the grass and pick up the litter."

But even that costs money, and it's not clear that the beaches commission report's recommendations will be funded. The panel called on the state to spend \$2.7 million a year more for maintenance staff and \$1.4 million for new dump trucks and beach-cleaning equipment. Even some lawmakers who served on the commission said the funding requests would face opposition on Beacon Hill.

Kristen Awed-Ladas, president of the Friends of Wollaston Beach, said recent improvements to the Quincy beach would be wasted if the area is not kept clean. "We want to be sure there is long-term maintenance," said Awed-Ladas. "It has always been a concern at Wollaston Beach."

Finding the source of the water-quality problems at Wollaston Beach is a difficult task, according to Bruce Berman, spokesman for Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, a research and advocacy organization that served as staff to the beaches commission.

Berman said the most likely causes are street run off and improper

sewer connections. The city of Quincy has spent nearly \$30 million on sewer repairs to reduce discharges into Quincy Bay.

"You are seeing more clean days at Wollaston," said Berman. "You are seeing better days."

Wollaston is in the midst of a major amenities makeover, with new sand and seawalls, as well as a new bicycle lane, sidewalks, showers, landscaping, and beach ramps.

At Nantasket, however, the seawalls need major repair or replacement, and the bathhouse and other buildings require considerable maintenance.

State Senator Robert L. Hedlund of Weymouth, a member of the beaches commission, said Nantasket's facilities need to be improved, especially given the beach's huge popularity in summer.

"People drive past all of these other beaches to go to a decrepit beach with great water quality," said Hedlund, who represents Hull. "The state should put more into Nantasket, which is the most heavily used state beach."

Hedlund said the state has authorized money to make improvements at Nantasket, but getting state agencies to agree on a plan is a long process.

Said Lory Newmyer, executive director of the Hull Lifesaving Museum and a regular beach goer at Nantasket, "It's clear there is going to need to be a long-term strategy to guarantee the safety and beauty of the beach."

Robert Preer can be reached at preer@globe.com. ■