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Boston Harbor still needs our attention



AT A TIME when August heat drives one's fancy beachward, let's take a moment to consider Boston Harbor: What it was, what it is now, and what it could be.

As a young reporter, I spent a good deal of time writing about the woeful state of the harbor. In those days, taking off from Logan, you could often see a plume of barely treated sewage discoloring the harbor from the outfall of the area's antiquated Deer Island plant.

In heavy rains, meanwhile, combined storm and sewer systems overflowed into the harbor or its tributaries. But wary of the clean-up costs, political leaders had spent years dragging their feet. The sad result was that the Boston area had made a cesspool of its aquatic front yard.

A lawsuit, several determined judges, a new agency (the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority), billions of dollars, a modern sewage-treatment facility, and several decades later, the harbor is now a glistening resource.

And yet, we haven't quite finished the job, notes Bruce Berman, director of strategy, communications, and programs at Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting the harbor and

promoting and programming its beaches.

Berman's group recently evaluated 14 Boston-area beaches based on the amount of time between Memorial Day and July 18 that it's been safe for swimming.

South Boston's beaches were stellar. Here's why: In 2011, the MWRA opened a 2.1 mile tunnel/tank capable of holding 19 million gallons of storm and waste water, which is later pumped to the Deer Island facility for treatment. That project, which cost about \$250 million, has all but eliminated beach closings in Southie.

But several problems stand out. The worst is King's Beach, in Lynn and Swampscott. After storms, sewage-laced stormwater from those two communities regularly results in high bacteria counts — and a beach that wasn't suitable for swimming 26 percent of the time.

That's a particular shame because King's is a sizable, easily accessible, two-community beach.

In Boston, one relatively small spit of sand also has a big problem: Tenean Beach in Dorchester. On Wednesday, when Berman and I visited, Tenean was closed for swimming, though one brave soul

plied the waters anyway. It was unsafe for swimming about a third of the time in early to mid-summer, according to Save the Harbor's study.

So what would it take to get those beaches in shape?

At Tenean, Berman suspects part of the problem is that nearby Victory Park has become a favorite spot for professional dog-walkers to let their canine charges run — and, um, off-load canine after-product, which rain washes into the harbor. Better enforcement could lead to a noticeable improvement.

King's Beach is more difficult. Lynn and Swampscott are trying to ferret out and fix old leaky pipes and improper or illicit sewage hook-ups. A similar effort is taking place in Quincy, where Wollaston Beach was unfit for swimming 10 percent of the time.

At the behest of Speaker Bob DeLeo, last year's environmental bond bill included a \$20 million authorization to aid communities with that work. "Making resources available to help these communities address these problems is absolutely critical to getting it done," says Berman.

Now, it's one thing to have the money legislatively authorized, quite another to have the spending approved by the administration. And yet, this effort should be a natural for a CEO who 1) loves digging into gritty problems 2) lives in Swampscott and 3) prides himself on his urban agenda.

In other words, Charlie Baker, roll up your sleeves, sharpen your pencil, and add a dose of executive energy to solving these problems.

Scot Lehigh can be reached at lehigh@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter @GlobeScotLehigh.