

Boston Herald

DCR 'burdened' by lack of leadership continuity at urban beaches: Report

By Chris Van Buskirk | May 12, 2023



A young woman plants a kiss on the shoulder of a man at Carson Beach on Thursday May 11. DCR is being called out for not doing a better job managing city swimming holes.

Advocates for city beaches say the Department of Conservation and Recreation is “burdened” by a lack of leadership continuity, clear direction and accountability among top officials.

A new report from Save the Harbor/Save the Bay and the Metropolitan Beaches Commission states the department does not have enough staff or resources to care for local beaches, and has a backlog of maintenance and postponed capital investments.

“With six DCR commissioners in the past eight years, DCR has lacked leadership continuity, clear direction, and accountability at the top, with DCR commissioners too often making commitments that they may not be around to keep,” the report said.

A group of state politicians and leaders at the advocacy organization said they are looking forward to working with newly-appointed DCR Commissioner Brian Arrigo, the former mayor of Revere, to address “systemic problems and implement long-term solutions that they may not be around to solve.”

Sen. Brendan Crighton, a co-chair of the commission, said it was not the aim of the report to be critical of DCR, but rather make clear the limitations it faces, including that its budget has been reduced by roughly 30% over the last 15 years.

Crighton said communication is “the biggest thing” he is hoping to see from DCR.

“[Arrigo] has done a tremendous job with communication in his previous roles, and I’m confident he’ll do the same here,” Crighton told the Herald.

Arrigo, in a statement to the Herald, said he worked hard as mayor to improve access to Revere Beach for residents of all abilities and transform it into a “welcoming place, where on any day you can hear languages from all over the world.”

“I know from that experience that access to our open spaces builds healthy and happy families,” he said. “Now, as I finish my third week in this new role, I look forward to working with and learning from the perspectives of our visitors and partners like the Metropolitan Beaches Commission to ensure that our parks and beaches – especially our urban oases- are accessible to those of all abilities, incomes and language capabilities.”

A DCR spokeswoman said the agency has not been provided the full report, but Arrigo “looks forward to delving into it.” The agency, the spokeswoman said, has also spent \$200,000 purchasing new beach wheelchairs and mobi mats for all of DCR’s waterfronts.

The Metropolitan Beaches Commission

was created in 2006 to make findings and recommendations to state lawmakers and DCR on improving local beaches, including King’s, Nahant, Revere, Constitution, Winthrop, Pleasure Bay, M Street, Carson, Savin Hill and Malibu, Tenean, Wollaston, and Nantasket beaches.

The report says Massachusetts state and local government per capita spending on parks and recreation was the lowest in the country and only 58% of the national average in 2021.

And while DCR staff who take care of beaches “work hard,” the department “does not have sufficient staff or resources to do the job we expect them to do,” the report said.

Save the Harbor/Save the Bay Executive Director Chris Mancini said DCR can make beaches more accessible by doing everything from offering signage in multiple languages to securing more funding for projects.

A DCR spokeswoman said the agency has taken steps to increase accessibility by adding safety signage to inland and coastal beaches that can be translated into more than seven languages using a QR code.

A shortfall in investment into beaches over the years has “compromised” equitable access, the report said, and the commission called on DCR to share a list of its planned capital investments for the region’s public beaches.

“Renewed capital investment in the beaches will benefit all the region’s residents, including people of color, people with disabilities, and people who do not speak English as their first language,” the report said.

Within 90 days of the release of the report, the Metropolitan Beaches Commission wants DCR to report on its efforts, metric, and plans to increase diversity within the agency at every level.

That’s on top of continuing to look for ways to develop “inclusive and transparent” processes for grant making and permitting for beach events, programs, and vendors “to ensure more equitable access and increased diversity,” the report said.

Mancini said the report is not trying to be critical of DCR but rather taking a “frank” look at the situation.

“While there’s criticism in there, it’s not of the agency or of the individuals, it’s criticism at a higher level that we as a state need to invest in this agency that manages half a million acres across the commonwealth,” he said.