

Not everyone can access Massachusetts' beautiful beaches; Here's what the state is doing to change that - [masslive.com](https://www.masslive.com)

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Nahant Beach on the North Shore. The long, narrow beach opens up at low tide into a wide plane of shallow water and shimmering sand.

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The state's Metropolitan Beaches Commission reviewed preliminary findings Saturday on improving access at regional beaches in the Greater Boston area after holding three hearings over the past year on accessibility, linguistic, and equity barriers that advocates say people often encounter when heading to beaches.

The commission is hoping to use testimony gathered at the hearings to generate recommendations for the Legislature, Baker administration, and Department of Conservation and Recreation on improving beach access for people of color, those with disabilities, and residents who speak a language other than English.

"We are holding this summit to share what we heard and learned from the hundreds of people who took part in the hearings and to give them the chance to let us know if we got it right before we release our final findings and recommendations to the Legislature, administration, DCR, and the public," Save the Harbor/Save the Bay Executive Director Chris Mancini said in a statement to MassLive.

Triangle, Inc. CEO Coleman Nee said the state needs to focus on physical infrastructure at beaches, programming for people with disabilities, and funding for accessibility.

“We’ve seen improvements, definitely, and the commission and Save the Harbor/Save the Bay are really focused on this, but we’re not at the stage where we can rest on our laurels, that’s for sure,” Nee told MassLive. “There’s no reason why someone should grow up in a community that borders a beautiful beach and have never spent their life accessing that beach or accessing that water if that’s something that they always wanted to do but just felt like they couldn’t.”

The commission plans to hold a fourth hearing this summer to hear from youth and teens about their experiences with beach access. Commission hearings in May and [November 2021](#) focused on improving access to beaches for people of color and those with disabilities.

The commission and Save the Harbor/Save the Bay looked to mobility mats and beach wheelchairs to help people with physical disabilities access the beach. [Grants awarded by DCR and Save the Harbor/Save the Bay](#) also focused on organizations that promote accessibility and access for people of color.

Triangle, Inc. runs received grant funding to run programs for people with disabilities, including Beach:Ability, a day of activities at the beach with sand and floating wheelchairs.

Nee said recommendations to public officials should include a request for more funding for the Universal Access Program, a program run by DCR that helps provide outdoor recreation opportunities at state parks in Massachusetts, including some beaches, “for visitors of all abilities,” according to the state.

“We’d love to see significant investments in not just the physical infrastructure of the beaches so that it becomes even more accessible for people, but equipment at each beach, and also significant investments in the Universal Access Program at DCR so that there’s more programming for people,” said Nee, who once served as secretary of veteran services under former Gov. Deval Patrick. “Disability is a wide swath, you can’t just paint everyone under the same brush.”

The commission [held a hearing in February](#) where advocates called for multilingual signage at beaches in the Greater Boston area in an effort to increase access to safety information for those who do not speak English.

Prior to the hearing, Save the Harbor/Save the Bay reviewed over 250 signs across beaches in Nahant, Lynn, Revere, Winthrop, East Boston, South Boston, Dorchester, Quincy, and Hull. Of those, only four were in languages other than English, according to the organization.

Advocates pitched DCR on placing QR codes on beach signs to allow people to access the information in multiple languages. Department of Conservation Commissioner Stephanie Cooper previously said new multi-language signs were a work in progress for “all metropolitan beaches.”

“We are also looking at retrofitting other waterfront signage, the beach rules signs and no dogs and we are going to be using QR codes,” Cooper said.

A spokesperson for DCR said the administration has added new signage at more than 18 state parks and metro beaches which include QR codes that provide translation into nine different languages including Spanish, Vietnamese, Brazilian Portuguese, Haitian Creole, Chinese, Arabic, Cape Verdean Creole, Mandarin, and Russian

“The Baker-Polito Administration has taken a proactive approach to making swimming locations safer places for children, families, and others to experience,” the spokesperson said in a statement to MassLive.

Save the Harbor/Save the Bay [issued a water quality flagging report card](#) last month that pointed to accuracy issues with the protocols the state uses to tell beachgoers whether water is safe to swim in.

A Department of Public Health spokesperson previously told MassLive that the state maintains [“a near real-time” public website](#) that displays marine water quality testing results.

But advocates contend the data from DPH and DCR used to inform beach water quality flags are a day late, and may not provide swimmers with the most up-to-date information.

“The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the department’s beach water quality website is only available in English and hasn’t been updated since 2001,” a Metropolitan Beaches Commission presentation for Saturday’s hearing said. “Though we met with them last week, we are still waiting for a public statement from the secretary of health and human services, [DPH] or their Bureau of Environmental Health on their plans and timeline to make their beach water quality website available in languages other than English.”

A spokesperson for DPH said representatives from DPH and DCR met with members of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay on June 9 “to receive their input and discuss several topics.”

At that meeting, the spokesperson said DPH shared plans to update the Beach Water Quality website “to be more accessible and invited Save the Harbor/Save the Bay to share recommendations for improving the website.”

“Currently, the Beach Water Quality website is updated twice daily and includes simple text that is available for translation in over 100 languages by commonly used translation technology,” the spokesperson said in a statement, echoing a similar statement provided to MassLive earlier this month.

In an email sent last week, Metropolitan Beaches Commission Co-Chair Sen. Brendan Crighton invited DPH Legislative Affairs Director Robert Oliver to testify at Saturday’s hearing to provide updates on improving “posting and flagging accuracy on the region’s public beaches,” according to emails obtained by MassLive.

In an email dated June 14, Oliver “respectfully” declined to attend.

“We thank you for the offer to participate, but we are going to have to respectfully decline,” an email to Crighton and commission co-chair Rep. Adrian Madaro said. “Look forward to the opportunity to catch up with staff after the meeting if there is anything necessary to follow up on.”

The DPH spokesperson said “DPH is not a member of the Metropolitan Beaches Commission and has not traditionally attended the summit.