

Editorial: Day at the beach

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There isn't any really good time to discuss Plymouth Beach. That fragile jewel in the crown of Plymouth has remained a hot button for residents, beach property owners, governmental agencies and environmental groups, alike, for decades. Everyone who loves and uses the beach has an opinion about the rights and rules that ought to reign supreme there. The town and its employees, many of whom are young, seasonal workers, end up charged with juggling all those interests to keep the public in the sand and surf, the town out of court, and the beach, itself, along with its flora and fauna, safe and sound for another year.

But with Labor Day receding into the rearview mirror of 2007 and the Crossover closed again till another Memorial Day, September seems as good a time as any to reconsider the issues and our use.

Plymouth Long Beach stretches about 3 miles from the public entrance and parking area on Warren Avenue out into a finger-like peninsula of sand that serves as a barrier protecting Plymouth Harbor. Beaches by their very nature are not stagnant, but change with every wave and tide, and most dramatically from storms and human use.

Long Beach didn't always look as it does today. Until the late 1890s, it was far wider, heavily treed, and home to more and larger buildings.

According to the 1899 report of the Coast Guard Life Saving Service regarding the Great Storm of November 1898, perhaps best known for the wreck of the Portland, "No such appalling calamity has occurred anywhere near by the coasts of the United States, or on the shore, for almost half a century, and it is doubtful whether there has been within the same period a coast storm of such Titanic Power." When it was over, the face of Plymouth Beach was inexorably and permanently changed.

The following century brought man-made repairs to help preserve the barrier beach and it also brought the automobile. With that eventually came the popularity of family vehicles capable of rolling people over and through the barriers of nature, including the rocks and shifting sands of Plymouth Long Beach.

Three miles is a long way for some. If you didn't have a boat or the legs to carry you out onto this pristine oasis, the only other viable option was to drive there. There was a photo that floated around town a couple of decades ago that painted an ugly picture of unrestricted use of the beach. In fact, it was used quite effectively by those advocating limited public access. It captured a busy summer day on Long Beach. Well, at least it showed the water and the spine of rocks that provides a stabilizing backbone for the beach. But the rest of it, every square inch of sand, was covered with vehicles. Not exactly your idyllic image of a day at the beach, is it?

Call us old-fashioned if you like, but we don't understand the appeal of lying on the sand staring up at the oil pan of another guy's SUV. Actually, we don't see the appeal in spending the day on any beach flanked by a line of cars.

Then, of course, there are the birds, those little piping plovers (and tons of terns) we just love to hate. Whatever your feelings about these little creatures, a little knowledge can't hurt. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offers a brief but comprehensive summary of the plover, its life patterns, history and the risks the species faces at www.fws.gov/northeast/pipingplover/overview. Piping plovers along the Atlantic Coast were placed on the federal

threatened species list in 1985, and they are also protected by the state. The legal restrictions and wrangling are extensive. But, if you're interested, there are plenty of state, federal and environmental groups more than willing to provide information. And the town's Natural Resources Department is a great source as well. But after all the ifs, ands and buts are aired, the fact is we have to abide by the laws. (Plymouth has come a long way since the night a former selectman noted during a public meeting that plover tastes like chicken.) The law requires we do our darnedest to provide a safe and encouraging spot for these threatened species to replenish their numbers in their natural habitat on Long Beach. Do we even need to mention how incredibly costly a breach of that law could be?

There are also other restrictions on the dunes, apart from the plovers. In short, stay the heck out of them. It is those dunes, after all, built and altered by nature that give us hope of enjoying Long Beach in the future. Disturbing them, or the beach grasses and other plants that root the shifting sands to the earth beneath, only hastens the beach's demise. Yet another "breach" that would be even more costly to the community.

There is also, of course, still private property on the beach. Some folks think the town should take that land back and ban any private residences there – some because they'd like to insulate the birds from the humans even more and others because they resent the limits private property puts on public access to the beach. Yes, the homes disrupt the dunes and property rights restrict where folks can park and wander. But whatever the goal, we bet most would also revolt at the thought of the town giving up the tax revenue from those high-value properties and the cost to the community of buying the land back.

But regardless of all the legal and environmental considerations, with another summer come and gone we can't help wondering why anyone needs to drive a car across the Crossover onto the beach at all. When restrictions began to limit parking on the beach itself, the town provided parking on Ryder Way that should be sufficient for those who truly can't make the pleasurable walk along the shore – our older residents, those with physical limitations, and even families toting children too small to hoof it out there under their own power.

Plymouth Long Beach is, after all, just that – a beautiful and pristine beach, not a parking lot. It's a fragile gift we are not only allowed to enjoy but are responsible to cherish and protect, not just for our own use but for posterity.

There was a big campaign a few years back with the slogan "Take Back Our Beach." It's now finally time we realized no one ever took our beach from us. It's still there. We still have access. The only thing the changes of the last couple of decades have taken from us is the right to abuse and destroy it – rights our Plymouth pride and common sense should have rejected long ago

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