

Experts: It's time to stop hating on Wollaston Beach

QUINCY — Longtime Quincy residents are sure about a few things: there is no apostrophe in Houghs Neck; its pronounced KWIN-zee, and you don't swim at Wollaston Beach.

For decades, neighbors have had a not-with-a-10-foot-pole attitude about going in the water at Boston Harbor's largest beach, but recent efforts to clean up the ocean have experts saying its time to drop the paranoia.

"Quincy was in sad shape 25 years ago, but there has been steady progress and we are now at the point where the water quality is pretty good," Bruce Berman, director of strategy and communications at Save the Harbor Save the Bay, said. "Sometimes it's easier to change reality than to change perceptions."

Massachusetts Bay, including Wollaston Beach, was one of the most polluted areas in the country in the 1980s because of thousand of gallons of sewage pumped daily into the water from the former treatment plant at the end of Houghs Neck. At one point the beach was so polluted it was closed to both shellfishing and swimming, and the city successfully sued the state on violation of the Clean Water Act.

Thirty years ago a program was established to clean up the beaches in the bay, and Quincy has been a leader in environmental cleanup ever since, Berman says.

"I'm really proud of them and its been consistent," he said of the city's efforts. "For more than 25 years, Quincy has always been ahead of the curve at understanding the value of clean water."

There are a lot of different things that could cause water pollution in an area, Berman says, but in Quincy it comes



down to the old system of storm water and sewer pipes. In the last few decades of cleanup efforts, the city has gone street by street testing storm water and sewer pipe connections to address the problem

"We have a fairly aggressive storm water management program and that is not just about Wollaston Beach but the entire city," Chris Walker, a spokesperson for the City of Quincy, said.

Save the Harbor puts out an annual report card rating local beaches for cleanliness of water. The report card released this May has Wollason at a six-year average ranking of 91 percent, and preliminary numbers for this summer say its gotten even better.

Save the Harbor tests Wollaston Beach water at four different locations every day for 115 days in the summer. The tests measure how many colonies of the enterococci bacteria are in the water, and any count above 103 colonies per milliliter is considered an unsafe level. The preliminary numbers from this summer say only 26 of the 369 samples

tested exceeded the limits.

While the numbers are improving, perception is not. Quincy residents still say there is no way they'd get in the water at Wollaston Beach, and Walker says he expects it'll be a while before people trust the beach again.

"You know, 30 or 40 years ago when there were a lot of people swimming in it, it was exponentially more dirty and nobody thought twice about it," he said. "The water is now as clean as its ever been, but these generational perceptions are hard to shake."

Cathy Urban, who has lived in Wollaston for 16 years, said she'd never swim at her local beach and doesn't even like walking along it barefoot. Amy Litchfield-Kennedy, however, who has lived in Quincy for over two decades, says she's been swimming in the water ever since she moved to town.

"I've always enjoyed the beach; my husband enjoys it, and I don't get what all the fuss is about," she said. "It never seemed dirty, honestly. The beach is always clean; it's a perfectly clean, well-maintained beach. We love it – its great and convenient."

Maureen Mazrimas, president of Friends of Wollaston Beach, says the cleanup efforts are still on going. The Friends group is urging residents to participate in the statewide CoastSweep next weekend to help get litter off the beach.

"It's absolutely an ongoing effort, even though the cleanup of Boston Harbor happened a long time ago, there are still issues," she said. "People are suspicious for sure but I think its been that way for 30 years. It's not perfect, it's far from perfect, but it's cleaner."