

East Boston Times-Free Press

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The Final Report

For more than 25 years the federal courts have been monitoring the cleanup and quality of Boston Harbor as submitted by the Massachusetts Water Resource Authority. The final report as ordered by the courts was submitted March 18.

Those of us who grew up in the Boston area and used the local beaches can still remember how the water quality continued to deteriorate in the 1960s and 1970s culminating to the point where in a 1988 presidential advertisement, Boston Harbor was named as the most polluted harbor in the country.

Since then much has changed for the better but at a tremendous cost to local ratepayers. For some users, the water bills that for years had been a few hundred dollars a year skyrocketed to thousands of dollars a year. Older cities like Revere had been fined hundreds of thousands of dollars in order to repair outdated and inefficient water and sewer lines.

The bottom line has been that Boston Harbor has seen a resurgence in marine life like seals in herds living in the Harbor and whales that were spotted off the coast of Revere last year.

Beaches like Constitution Beach in East Boston that were once closed for many days during a summer heat wave because of dangerous water quality issues are now open. Residents can now swim in the Charles River, that in the 1970s if you fell into the water, a tetanus shot was required immediately.

Organizations like Save the Harbor/Save the Bay can now focus on the positive aspects that living on the coast can afford residents rather than continually fighting for

the basics like better water quality.

However, while much has been done for the water quality, much still remains to be done. There are still many brownfields along waterways like the Mystic River that leach chemicals into the water. The Wynn Casino in Everett has spent tens of millions of dollars in cleaning up the contaminated site that will house the casino. In Boston, homeowners are now required to spend thousands of dollars in neighborhoods like the South End and Back Bay on water filtration systems to take the rain runoff from the roofs and put into the ground rather than go into the ground.

All these are positive examples of more than 30 years of hard work and billions of dollars to bring back the water quality to acceptable levels.

Today, one can be optimistic about the future of the Harbor but also guarded. Massachusetts's politicians have always shown the willingness to spend money on public projects but not the resolve to fund the maintenance of these projects. Our deteriorating infrastructure and the transit system are two examples of billions having been spent in the construction phase but then grossly underfunding the maintenance.

Living on the coast, given the fact that our population is growing, our water environment is safe for now. But if all the good and billions of dollars that have been spent to get us to this point, are not constantly watched then we will find ourselves back in the same place when songs were sung like "Love That Dirty Water" in the 1970s and in 1988 being named as the most polluted harbor in America.