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The Boston Harbor Clean-Up: An Environmental — and Economic — Success Story

By Record Staff

A recent report issued by the public interest group Save the Harbor/Save the Bay informs us that the beaches surrounding the Metropolitan Boston area were open for bathing 96 percent of the time during the summer of 2016 and that, barring unforeseen circumstances, the outlook should be the same for 2017.

This is quite an accomplishment, given that a generation ago, beaches in the Boston area were closed more often than not — and even when open, our beaches were not exactly inviting to swimmers and other recreational users.

We ourselves recall sailing in Boston Harbor in the 1980s and being unable to find a clean place to take a dip off our boat — and that included the outer harbor waters around the Brewster islands. There was no escape from the sliminess (for want of a better word) that essentially made the waters of Boston Harbor nothing more than a giant cesspool.

It certainly is true that the clean-up of Boston Harbor came at great expense to the ratepayers of the MWRA and surrounding sewer districts. Water and sewer rates skyrocketed on an annual basis for the 15 years of the construction phase and immediate aftermath of the construction of the MWRA's treatment plant on Deer Island.

However, as with everything else in life, you get what you pay — there is no such thing as a free lunch, as the saying goes — so while the sudden shock of rising water

& sewer rates caused some degree of hardship for some ratepayers, the bottom line is that all of us in this area had taken for granted the cheap water & sewer rates we had known for our entire lives — as well as where our water came from and where it drained out to — with no concern about the consequences of what we were doing to Boston Harbor, the greatest natural resource in our area, every time we flushed our toilets.

Moreover, as with many things when it comes to government fees and taxes, most ratepayers only looked at one side of the cost equation. We did not recognize that not only were there economic drawbacks associated with creating a polluted harbor, but that there were huge economic gains to be derived from making an investment in cleaning it up.

The magnificent and clean harbor that we have now, which admittedly was achieved at great expense, has been an economic engine for the entire area, creating jobs and adding immensely to property values not only along the immediate coast, but throughout Greater Boston, that have benefited every ratepayer.

So as we look forward to the coming summer of 2017, we can be grateful that we have a clean Boston Harbor to enjoy with our friends and families. In the 30-plus years since the MWRA has come into existence, the advantages, economic and otherwise, of achieving a sparkling Boston Harbor have extended far beyond merely being able to enjoy a swim on a hot summer's day (which, in our view, is priceless)