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Let's clean up the stink at King's Beach



King's Beach straddles Lynn and Swampscott.

LYNN — What a stench.

Thursday morning, I was at one of my favorite places: King's Beach, straddling Lynn and Swampscott. King's speaks to much that is great about this country. It's a gorgeous, well-maintained public space, with a handsome promenade. Summer evenings here are heavenly, the place alive with folks from all imaginable backgrounds, sauntering along the strand speaking Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, Arabic, and English.

But King's also speaks to something not so great: the fact that people with fewer resources tend to be the ones who must put up with lousy conditions for years. People for whom this beach is the only way to cool off in the heat must swim in water frequently contaminated by human waste. Those who can afford it go elsewhere.

At issue is an outlet that belches stormwater onto the beach — stormwater that, because of poor maintenance of old pipes and messed-up connections on new ones, also includes waste from the sewage systems of both towns. A few days ago, that outlet belched water onto the sand that made the air downwind truly fetid. Sea gulls feasted on the outflow. Occasionally, a dog wandered in. Blech.

Last week, Save the Harbor/Save the Bay — the stellar nonprofit that has led the transformation of the region's beaches over the last three decades — ranked King's at the bottom of its annual report card on water quality. As usual. In 2015, King's was closed because of poor water quality one out of every four swimming days. Only Tenean Beach in Dorchester did worse, though Save the Harbor spokesman Bruce Berman expects conditions there will improve this year, since a source of contamination (a failing sewer line that had put 5 gallons per hour of sewage into the storm pipe) was recently located.

Of course, there was a time when many more unfortunate souls were subjected to these lousy conditions. Decades ago, great plumes of sewage were pumped into the harbor, and its beaches were truly disgusting. But lengthy court battles and \$5 billion worth of major clean-ups, including investments in stormwater outfalls and sewer repairs, turned most of the beaches — stretching from Lynn and Revere in the north to Quincy and Hull in the South — into gems. Today, the beaches in South Boston are the cleanest urban beaches in the country.

But poor old King's has been left behind. Berman says the problem here is that some

bad connections and poor maintenance on sewer pipes in both towns mean human waste finds its way into the stormwater pipes that lead to the beach.

Fixing these problems is an expensive proposition so, not surprisingly, the two towns have tried to blame each other for the high bacteria counts. In the past, they've argued that there isn't any sewage flowing into the pipes at all, a claim that is demonstrably false. Or that the high bacteria counts are caused by the sand. Or that the testing wasn't accurate. The steps they have taken to find and fix the issues have done just about nothing to improve water quality.

"Sometimes it feels like we're dealing with science deniers on this stuff," Berman says. "It's time for them to get their heads out of the sand and work together with state government, and with us, to solve the problem."

You have to wonder if officials in Lynn and Swampscott would let their own kids swim at King's. I'd have liked to ask them, but when I tried them just after noon on Friday, their offices were closed.

Look, this is a glorious moment for Boston Harbor and its beaches. And it could be even better. The state has signaled a commitment to fund fixes for the two towns' sewage issues. An environmental bond bill has authorized \$20 million for that cause, but it hasn't yet been appropriated. Lynn and Swampscott must get their acts together. They should come up with a real plan to find the sources of bacteria and fix them. And they should show Beacon Hill they're ready for the money to pay for it.

"It's not rocket science," Berman says. "All it takes is the will and the resources to get it done."

They must find that will, and soon. They should act as if the people who swim at King's actually matter.

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