

Toronto Beaches Plan

Date:	January 13, 2009
To:	Executive Committee
From:	Lou Di Gironimo, General Manager, Toronto Water Brenda Patterson, General Manager, Parks, Forestry & Recreation Dr. David McKeown, Medical Officer of Health
Wards:	Wards 6, 13, 14, 28, 30, 32, 36, 44
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

Swimmable beaches are often used as an indicator of Toronto’s environmental performance and quality of life. Over the past five years, the City has taken many steps to improve its 11 designated swimming beaches, and work continues on projects to reduce beach pollution from combined sewer overflows and stormwater discharges.

The report titled “Great City, Great Beaches: Toronto Beaches Plan” (January 2009) has been prepared and provided separately to Committee members and the City Clerk's Office. The Toronto Beaches Plan identifies actions to further enhance beach water quality, maintenance and operations, facilities and amenities, programming, and education and communications. The Plan is driven by a vision of getting all Toronto swimming beaches to and beyond the Blue Flag standard – the international eco-label for quality beaches. Coupled with existing operations and other planned continuous service improvements, the actions outlined in the Plan will maintain the Blue Flag status of six City beaches, bring five others up to the Blue Flag standard and potentially create a new swimming beach at Colonel Samuel Smith Park.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager, Toronto Water and the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation recommend that:

1. Council approve the action plan outlined in attachment 1 to improve Toronto’s swimming beaches in 2009-10.

2. A three-year pilot project be undertaken at Sunnyside Beach to enclose a portion of the swimming area and provide water that meets Ontario's recreational water quality standard at a cost not to exceed \$1,000,000.00 (net of GST) in 2009;
3. Subject to City Council adopting Recommendation 2, the General Manager of Toronto Water be given authority to sole source the design and/or construction and/or operation of the facility if necessary in order to have the enclosed swimming area at Sunnyside Beach in operation for the 2009 swimming season;
4. Opportunities to include Blue Flag quality swimming beaches in the development of the Arsenal Lands/Marie Curtis Park West, Colonel Samuel Smith Park and Port Union Waterfront Park Phase 2 be investigated in consultation with adjacent communities and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority;
5. An international design competition be held in 2009 to develop a new prototype lifeguard stand for future use at Toronto beaches;
6. The Chief of Police be requested to extend lifeguard hours during Extreme Heat Alerts at selected Blue Flag beaches that are not posted against swimming;
7. As planning work is completed, the General Managers of Toronto Water and Parks, Forestry and Recreation report back to the appropriate Standing Committee to identify the capital budget requirements and operating impact on Parks, Forestry and Recreation services and programs to implement the Toronto Beaches Plan; and
8. The appropriate City officials be authorized and directed to take the necessary action to give effect thereto.

Financial Impact

Improving Toronto's swimming beaches is a long-term project. Only those actions identified in attachment 1 are being recommended for approval by Council at this time.

Funding in the amount of \$1,000,000 has been approved in the 2009 Toronto Water Capital Budget (Account CWW447 – Stormwater Management) for the recommended pilot project at Sunnyside Beach. The required funds to accomplish the actions for 2009-2010 as outlined in attachment 1 will be accomplished within existing budget envelopes. Once the necessary planning studies are completed, a future report to Executive Committee from the General Managers of Water and Parks, Forestry and Recreation will identify the capital budget requirements and operating impact on Parks, Forestry and Recreation services and programs of additional actions to implement the Toronto Beaches Plan.

The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

On April 25, 26 and 27, 2006, Council requested staff to prepare a City-wide integrated beach management strategy, with an initial focus on Sunnyside Beach.

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/2006/agendas/council/cc060425/pof3rpt/cl022.pdf>

On September 25, 26 and 27, 2006, Council adopted a framework for developing both a City-wide strategy and a more specific Western Waterfront Master Plan for the Sunnyside area. The Waterfront Secretariat is leading the latter project, with a staff report to Council expected in 2009.

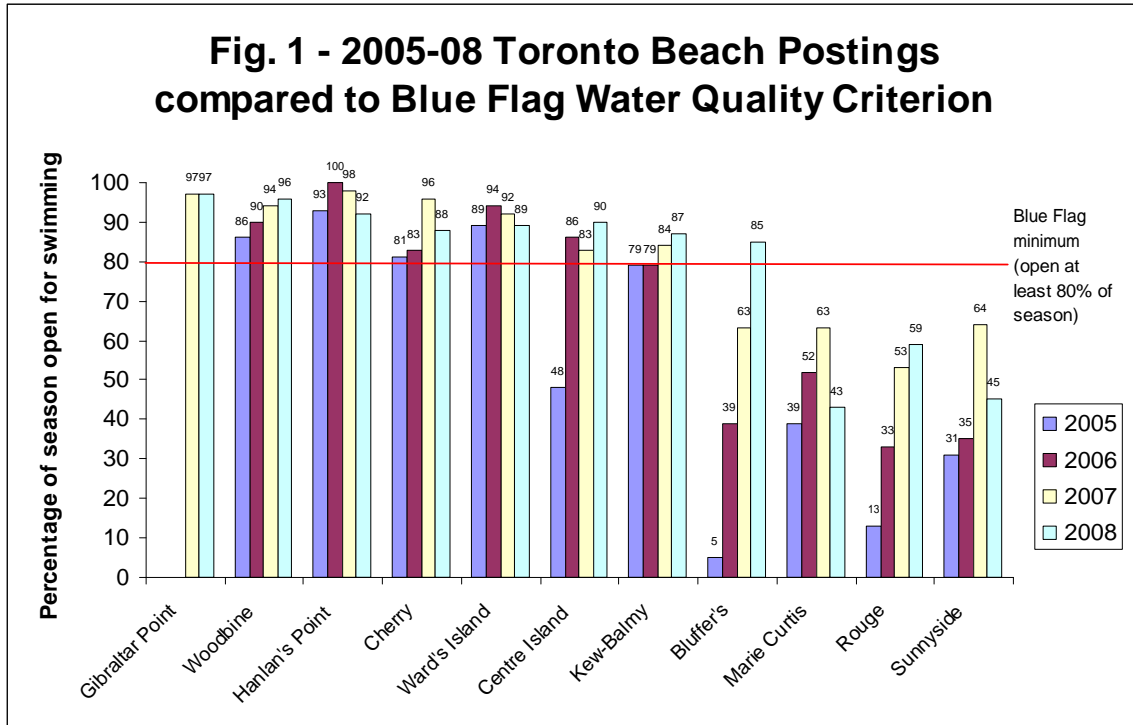
<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/2006/agendas/council/cc060925/pof7rpt/cl012.pdf>

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Toronto began the process of certifying its swimming beaches through the international Blue Flag program in 2003. In Canada, a Blue Flag is awarded only if the beach meets 27 criteria relating to water quality (e.g., open for swimming for at least 80% of the beach season), environmental management (e.g., collection of litter and recyclables), safety and services (e.g., presence of lifeguards and access for people with disabilities) and environmental education (e.g., information about beach ecosystems).

Toronto's 11 swimming beaches can be grouped into three categories according to their beach water quality and Blue Flag status (fig. 1). Six beaches (Woodbine, Cherry, Ward's Island, Centre Island, Gibraltar Point and Hanlan's Point) meet the internationally recognized criteria for Blue Flag designation and have been awarded Blue Flags. Two beaches (Kew-Balmy and Bluffer's Park) are close to the Blue Flag threshold. Based on recent beach water sampling results, Kew-Balmy will likely be awarded a Blue Flag in 2009; Bluffer's may qualify in 2010. The remaining three beaches (Sunnyside, Rouge and Marie Curtis Park East) have poor beach water quality and are frequently posted against swimming.

Fig. 1 - 2005-08 Toronto Beach Postings compared to Blue Flag Water Quality Criterion



COMMENTS

The Importance of Swimmable, Quality Beaches

Swimmable beaches are often cited as an indicator of Toronto’s environmental performance and quality of life. In 1987, the International Joint Commission declared our beaches to be an “impaired beneficial use” of the waterfront. Improving water quality for body-contact recreation in the lake and reducing the need for posting of beaches by the Medical Officer of Health is an objective of the City’s Wet Weather Flow Management Master Plan (WWFMMP). Both the Toronto Community Foundation and the Toronto City Summit Alliance use beach postings to monitor Toronto’s environmental health and liveability. The Mayor has committed to helping clean up Lake Ontario to make Toronto’s beaches more swimmable as part of a clean, green and beautiful waterfront.

The report titled “Great City, Great Beaches: Toronto Beaches Plan” (January 2009) outlines actions.

Recent Achievements

The City has undertaken many beach improvement initiatives since the Blue Flag certification process began:

- Toronto became the first community in Canada to fly the Blue Flag. Toronto was awarded four Blue Flags in 2005 and received another two in 2007.
- A dune and wetland system was created at Bluffer’s Park Beach to intercept and divert the flow of intermittent streams, dramatically improving beach water quality.

- Maintenance dredging was undertaken at Centre Island Beach to enhance lake-water circulation and improve beach water quality.
- Storm sewer outfalls discharging on the west side of Sunnyside Beach are now intercepted by the Ellis Avenue & Colborne Lodge Drive Stormwater Management Facilities.
- A new beach maintenance program has been implemented, resulting in more frequent litter picking, washroom cleaning, beach grooming and collection of waste and recyclables.
- To reduce E.coli loading by waterbirds and waterfowl, a “Don’t Feed the Birds” public education campaign has been mounted in all City waterfront parks. The Canada geese management program has been enhanced, and border collies are now used by the City to herd geese and gulls off swimming beaches.
- Beach wheelchairs are available for free short-term loan at Woodbine Beach to enable park visitors with disabilities to reach the water’s edge.

Key Challenges and Opportunities in Meeting Blue Flag Standards

River discharges are the most significant source of pollution at Toronto’s most-frequently posted beaches – Sunnyside, Marie Curtis and Rouge. Wetlands at the mouth of the Humber and Rouge rivers are also good natural habitats and thus reservoirs of non-human E.coli that impact adjacent beaches. Addressing these issues will require “renovating” the Humber, Etobicoke Creek and Rouge watersheds. This involves eliminating combined sewer overflows and, more importantly, controlling and treating all storm runoff to a much higher standard than currently exists to meet recreational water quality criteria near the mouths of urban rivers and eliminate excessive algae along the nearshore of Lake Ontario.

On the land side, beach maintenance has recently been improved, but many facilities are not in a good state of repair. Physical improvements will be an important way to increase beach use and user satisfaction. Aging park infrastructure (for example, washrooms and change rooms) and a shortage of amenities (such as showers and food service) undermines the attractiveness and usability of Toronto’s beaches. Old construction rubble on the lake bottom makes swimming and wading unpleasant at several locations.

With the exception of Toronto Island, access to beaches is generally good by car but often difficult by transit, foot and cycle. Disabled users wanting to use the beach have little or no access to the water’s edge or into the lake. All users could benefit from increased access to shade and ultraviolet radiation protection.

On the green front, opportunities exist to make beach infrastructure, maintenance and operations more environmentally sustainable. Environmental education could be improved, and further steps should be taken to manage terrestrial and aquatic habitats along our beaches.

A Vision for Great Beaches

Addressing these challenges and opportunities and pushing Toronto's swimming beaches to the next level is the goal of the Toronto Beaches Plan. Our lakeside beaches will be safer, cleaner, more usable, more accessible and greener than they are today.

Opportunities to swim and wade at supervised beaches will continue to be distributed equitably across the waterfront. All swimming beaches will fly the Blue Flag, hosting a range of recreational uses with the necessary supporting amenities, while ensuring that the natural environment is protected, enhanced or restored.

In Toronto, a great swimming beach will have:

- *Beach water quality* that allows swimming and wading to take place every day during the beach season, is communicated to users in a more timely manner, is rigorously monitored for sources of pollution, and is supported by safer and more comfortable lake bottom conditions.
- *Maintenance and operations* that offer extended beach lifeguard protection during hot weather, provide cleaner washrooms and changerooms, reduce fouling by birds, animals, nuisance algae and floating debris, and respond better to storm debris and higher levels of use attributed to climate change.
- *Facilities and amenities* that are in a good state of repair, attractive, environmentally sustainable, accessible to people with disabilities, more easily reached by transit, foot and bicycle, offer more and better shade opportunities, and generally support a highly satisfying beach visit.
- *Programming* that reduces potential conflicts between different waterfront user groups, enables visitors to learn about beach ecosystems and issues, encourages community stewardship to restore natural features, and brings more children from non-waterfront neighbourhoods to the beach.
- *Education and communications* that make beach conditions and regulations more understandable to users, increase local awareness of the Blue Flag program and beach improvement initiatives, and attract tourists to Toronto's beaches.

A Plan for Great Beaches

The Toronto Beaches Plan identifies specific actions to enhance the beach water quality and visitor experience at Toronto's 11 swimming beaches – actions that will get all City beaches to and beyond the international Blue Flag standard. Short-term actions to improve Toronto's beaches in 2009-10 are outlined in attachment 1. Other actions which achieve Council's vision for swimming beaches will either be accomplished within existing budget envelopes or be subject to future operating or capital funding requests, once the necessary planning studies have been completed (attachment 2).

Watershed-wide projects already approved in the WWFMMP will take longer than 25 years to improve water quality at Toronto's three river-impacted swimming beaches. Pollution from the Humber River means that there are few quick, inexpensive options to reduce postings at Sunnyside Beach. It is proposed that a portion of the lake at Sunnyside be enclosed and the water treated and/or circulated to provide swimming water that meets Ontario's recreational water quality standard. This project represents an interim solution

that can be implemented in 2009. It is consistent with directions emerging in the Western Waterfront Master Plan which will recommend a multi-year phased approach to improving beach water quality in this area. A staff report on this Master Plan, which examines the area between Marilyn Bell Park and the Humber River (including Sunnyside Beach) will be tabled later in 2009.

Other planning processes aiming to achieve better beach water quality should be undertaken with public input at three sites. Marie Curtis Park East Beach is impacted by pollution from Etobicoke Creek. The feasibility of either deflecting the creek's discharge away from the beach (as proposed in the WWFMMP), relocating the beach to the west side of the creek (which is not precluded by the Arsenal Lands/Marie Curtis Park West Master Plan Addendum), or relocating the beach to Colonel Samuel Smith Park should be studied.

Colonel Samuel Smith Park, located about 3 km east of Marie Curtis Park, has better transit access and is more centrally located relative to the south Etobicoke community. The feasibility of creating a new swimming beach that will either replace the current Marie Curtis Park East Beach or serve as an additional (12th) swimming beach for the City should be studied, with a focus on assessing beach water quality and lake bottom conditions.

Rouge Beach is impacted by pollution from the Rouge River and tails off quickly into deep water. To get better beach water quality and lake bottom conditions and be closer to the West Rouge community, the feasibility of relocating the beach about 0.75 km to the west as part of the development of Port Union Waterfront Park Phase 2 should be studied.

Lifeguards are a highly valued safety service at Toronto's beaches. Extending lifeguard hours at strategic locations during hot weather would represent a significant service improvement. The Toronto Police Service should be asked to extend lifeguard hours during Extreme Heat Alerts at selected Blue Flag beaches on the mainland and at Toronto Island provided beach water quality is safe for swimming. In addition, the City should promote design excellence at City beaches by launching an international design competition to design, build and install new lifeguard stands. Replacement of all of the existing stands with the new design will be subject to a future capital budget request.

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SIGNATURES

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LIST OF ATTACHMENTS

1. Beach Improvement Actions for 2009-2010
2. “Great City, Great Beaches: The Toronto Beaches Plan” (January 2009)

ATTACHMENT 1 BEACH IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS FOR 2009-2010

Existing Blue Flag Beaches

Woodbine Beach

- Extend beach lifeguard hours during Extreme Heat Alerts.
- Provide separate beach areas for swimmers, kiteboarders, and personal watercraft users.

Cherry Beach

- Better separation of the swimming beach from the adjacent off-leash dog area.
- Provide separate beach areas for swimmers and kiteboarders.

Ward's Island Beach

- Separate swimmers and boaters off-shore.
- Improve beach debris removal after storms.
- Develop new environmental programs for children.

Centre Island Beach

- Extend beach lifeguard hours during Extreme Heat Alerts.
- Provide beach wheelchairs.
- Develop new environmental programs for children.

Gibraltar Point Beach

- Complete detailed design of off-shore protection and a sand management plan to control shoreline erosion.
- Provide beach wheelchairs.
- Develop new environmental programs for children.

Hanlan's Point Beach

- Separate swimmers and boaters off-shore.
- Provide separate beach areas for swimmers and kiteboarders.
- Improve beach debris removal after storms.
- Undertake beach ecosystem restoration projects with the community.

Beaches Approaching Blue Flag Status

Kew-Balmy Beach

- Increase the frequency of City dog patrols to herd gulls and geese off beach.
- Provide separate beach areas for swimmers, kiteboarders, and personal watercraft users.
- Improve beach access adjacent to the R.C. Harris Water Treatment Plant at the foot of Nursewood Road.
- Implement the Eastern Beaches Storm Sewer Outfall Control Project.
- Complete the Environmental Assessment for the Scarborough Waterfront Combined Sewer Overflows and Storm Sewer Outfalls Control Project.

Bluffer's Park Beach

- Increase the frequency of City dog patrols to herd gulls and geese off beach.
- Undertake beach ecosystem restoration projects with the community.
- Control storm runoff from adjacent parkland and the beach parking lot.

Beaches with Poor Water Quality

Marie Curtis Park East Beach

- Review opportunities to relocate the swimming beach, including the investigation of water quality and lake bottom conditions at Colonel Samuel Smith Park.
- Increase the frequency of City dog patrols to herd gulls and geese off beach.
- Separate swimmers and boaters off-shore.
- Improve beach debris removal after storms.
- Implement the Etobicoke Waterfront Stormwater Management Project.

Sunnyside Beach

- Curtain-off and treat water in a swimming area near the Sunnyside Bathing Pavilion on a pilot-project basis.
- Increase the frequency of City dog patrols to herd gulls and geese off beach.
- Improve beach debris removal after storms.

Rouge Beach

- Review opportunities to relocate the swimming beach.
- Increase the frequency of City dog patrols to herd gulls and geese off beach.
- Improve beach debris removal after storms.