

# **Getting Things Done: Successful Advocacy and Local Action – Strategies for Willard Beach Improvements**

## **Speakers:**

**Theresa Wiper, Willard Beach Committee Chair**

**Jeffrey Jordan, City Manager, City of South Portland 1996-2006**

**Brenda Peluso, Willard Beach Committee and Volunteer**

## **Welcome by Theresa Wiper, Willard Beach Committee Chair.**

Theresa Wiper lives in the Willard Beach neighborhood, is a member of the Willard Neighborhood Association, and was the driving force behind the creation of a comprehensive management plan to improve conditions at Willard Beach in South Portland, Maine.

## **Overview**

Willard is a 2000 foot long beach in the City of South Portland. It has all the same issues that face larger beaches. South Portland is made up of a number of neighborhoods and neighborhood associations. The Willard Neighborhood Association is one such association. From that organization, the Willard Beach Committee was formed to attempt to address some of the arguments about how to handle perceived problems with and at the beach. Though there were many complaints, no one seemed to be able to answer the very basic questions about what influences changes in the conditions at the beach or how best to address them. This new committee, led by Theresa Wiper, was and still is open to all interested parties. The original beach committee included the city planner (also a neighbor) and people who have lived at Willard Beach for a long time (from 8 years to over 30 years).

## **Creating the Guide/Plan**

When her son started school, Theresa decided to take the beach issues on by writing a guide. What started out as a small project turned into a 40 page document that includes such diverse information as laws regarding sewer lines running under the beach, historical reports, and source materials from the Army Corps of Engineers and the Geological Survey. She gathered records, facts and figures, and other data on beach related subjects:

- General beach information and history
- Water Quality – History and Issues
- Dune Management and Restoration
- Hazard Mitigation Plan
- Beach replenishment issues
- Storm water runoff issues/sewer pipe locations
- Any relevant regulations (sand dune, floodplain, etc.)

- Past reports done regarding the beach (i.e. geologic studies, army corps of engineers, etc.)
- Other issues: jetty, beach cleaner, seaweed, historic structures,
- Miscellaneous – police and fire regulations, mooring information, punt storage rules, etc.
- Who to call list (provided by the Friends of Casco Bay)

The guide, with all its research and input, took 4-5 months to complete. Theresa admits that she knew nothing about beaches when she started. She sought out and queried many sources (i.e. the Maine Geological Survey, the State Geologist, the regional coastal resource planner, etc.) One source was a geologist who had worked on Willard Beach issues back in the 1970's. She arranged for him to revisit the area. In his estimation, the beach had actually improved since then and appeared to be in much better shape.

Input was received from the South Portland Water Resource Protection, Police, and Parks and Recreation departments. Theresa also checked her information with the Maine Geological Survey and other state and independent agencies that had given input. Their feedback and suggestions were integrated into her final beach management plan.

The long term management plan details what the city, volunteers and residents can do by working together to improve the quality of the beach. The plan continues to be a work in progress and now needs updating to include new information as well as the progress that has been made.

The committee meets on an annual basis (or more often if necessary) to review past projects, discuss issues, and decide on projects for the coming year. The committee then meets with the city manager in February to suggest projects for the spring.

### **Volunteers**

There is a South Portland Volunteer Network of approximately 150 people who are contacted by e-mail when there is a project. Volunteers come from the neighborhood and outside the neighborhood. It appears that there is a different group of volunteers for each project. The 2007 Earth Day event netted 40 individuals who worked to clean up manmade litter at the beach that resulted from the Patriots' Day Storm. The bathhouse on the beach and old fishing shacks on Fisherman's Point have also been repaired and painted over the last few years.

### **Examples of Willard Beach Projects and Goals [from PowerPoint presentation]**

- Plantings at the beach entrances with dune appropriate plants
- Dune restoration:
  - Planting over 2,000 dune grass sprigs, fertilizing areas with seaweed as fertilizer
  - Coordinating a dune project with SMCC Plant and Soil Technology Department
    - removal of invasive plants, planting beach pea, and nourishing the dunes with seaweed (October 2003)
- Painting and exterior work on the beach bathhouse and historical fishing shacks
- Establishing a flag system at the bathhouse to alert the public as to the water quality status

- Coordinating the beach profiling project at first with neighborhood volunteers and then recruiting the SMCC Marine Science Department who (as part of a class) has continued the profiling project
- General education of both city officials and the public on beach management, laws, and issues
- Earth Day (Spring) and International Coastal Cleanup (Fall) Beach Cleanups - Annually

**Speaker: Brenda Peluso, Willard Beach Committee and Volunteer**

Brenda is a nearly lifelong resident of the Willard Beach area and brings her personal and historical perspective to the discussion.

Brenda noted that projects can be controversial and offered a short history of beach management. Willard Beach had enjoyed the stewardship by one life guard for 35 consecutive summers. During his tenure, graders were used to clean the beach for recreational use. When grading beaches was made illegal, the dunes started to grow in and some residents began assisting the dune growth with planting and fertilizing. This riled residents as it created less beach for recreation. There was a jetty that had fallen into disrepair and some thought it should be maintained to protect beach. With the longtime life guard gone, there was a real lack of leadership on the beach.

Brenda praised the guide and the fact that everyone had buy-in. This creation of a plan and the formation of a beach advisory committee marked a change in the relationship between citizens and the city because of the science that could be applied to controversial practices. The dunes proved their



worth during the Patriots Day storm of 2007 when 20-30 feet of dunes were lost – they did their job. The lesson was, let nature do its work.

Some volunteers still don't like dunes but they are willing to help maintain and care for the beach by giving their time for other endeavors. The bath house renovation project was a great example of cooperation between city and residents. City workers power washed the bathhouse, provided paint; residents cleaned, painted and made repairs.

The committee also worked on water quality issues. Decades ago, the beach was pretty but raw sewage ran into the water. Now the beach has a flag system to notify visitors when the water quality is bad. If the city is unsure of the water quality on a certain day, they put up a red or yellow flag as a caution. Signs have also been created to address the issue of dogs on the beach and other concerns. The committee has attempted to see that all signage is artistic, pleasing and consistent. The consistency piece takes ongoing coordination with the city.

Southern Maine Community College has been a great resource. Volunteers started doing beach profiling. Theresa looked into what technical and manpower resources the community college might have available and be willing to donate. They offered GPS, GIS equipment used by the SMCC program and now they serve as beach monitors.

The 4-5 entrances to the beach have also been enhanced. Barriers have been created to keep sand on the beach during major storms, rather than having it wash up into streets as it did.



## **Jeffrey Jordan, City Manager, City of South Portland from 1996-2006**

There were three major facets of the **Willard Beach Committee's** involvement:

### **Leadership**

### **Time**

### **Passion**

These three components were critical to getting the beach master planning process going. Communities have minimal financial resources. Only 20 or so municipalities in Maine have town or city planners. If a group can gather the scientific research and provide information that information to the town, they can greatly improve the decision-making process. Before the guide was created, there was just controversy. Neighbors and the City of South Portland had no real information about what was the appropriate way to manage beach issues. So nothing was done. The committee brought science and logic to the table.

**TIME** -- The Parks and Recreation Department has huge demands on its time. During the Spring, when residents were apt to notice the condition of the beach, Parks and Recreation would be trying to maintain ball fields and keep up with other repairs. Beach front residents and others were asking, "Why haven't you cleaned up the beaches?" When Theresa organized a list of willing volunteers and city workers saw that residents were willing to help, there was a change in the attitude of city staff. When Theresa offered time, a precious resource, the City was more than willing to provide materials. This created a condition where city staff and volunteers were able to work shoulder to shoulder.

**PASSION** -- When city workers realized the passion and spirit of the residents, they were happy to do more – it inspired staff to do the right thing.

**LEADERSHIP** -- Armed with information from the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, the State geologist, and the State's Coastal program, the Committee was able to develop a thoughtful and well researched master plan for Willard Beach, that was ultimately adopted by the City Council and included in the City's Comprehensive Plan.

The leadership of the Committee was recognized by the City. The Spring Point Leadership and Innovation Award was created by Jeff to recognize a single effort by a person – something that would create improvements in the City of South Portland that would last at least a generation. Theresa received one of awards for her leadership and passion in improving the ecological health of Casco Bay.

### **OPEN DISCUSSION:**

**Is all of Willard Beach public?** "Yes."

**Is there parking and is it free?** "Yes."

**Are there rules on pets and how do they work?** May 1-Sept 30, 6-9am dogs are allowed on the beach but must be under voice control. This is, technically, the only time they are allowed during this summer

period. There are plastic bag/pickup dispensers and trash cans as well as signs on the beach to encourage owners to pick up after their dogs.

**Wildlife and regulations?** There are no plovers on Willard Beach (as there are on Wells Beach). Birds don't come, so Willard does not deal with regulatory issues of this type the way the Town of Wells and its residents and visitors must. An audience member from Wells noted that their choices are driven by regulators rather than residents.

**Does town take care of trash pickup?** "Yes."

**Is there vandalism?** "Yes." Residents and the city take an aggressive approach to removal of graffiti. In recent years it has increased dramatically with 'tagging' at the beach house, fish house, on the sea wall, private homes, and on surrounding South Portland businesses. The defense? – Paint right over it on private homes. An immediate paint over discourages vandals as they can't go back and look at their damage.

**Where does funding come from for projects?** Funding/resources come from volunteers and the City of South Portland. In the beginning, a fund was created for \$25,000 each year for 2 years for dune grass plantings, an on-grade board walk, etc. Presently, there is no money left. The committee now needs to go back to the city and ask each time something is needed.

Jeff Jordan said it is very important for committees to determine the timing of the municipal budgeting process. Find out when the city or town manager starts to plan the budget – write a letter, make visit. Base request on research – solid evidence. He noted that there are two types of budgets – the ANNUAL operating budget, and a CAPITAL Improvements Plan budget. This CIP is for special projects, items such as steps leading from the beach, or parking lots. He suggests that these types of requests be placed in the CIP. He strongly urged residents work through staff, noting that there is a pecking order in government. For this type of initiative, citizens would want to work with Director of Parks and Recreation and/or the City or Town Manager. Leadership comes from city or town staff. Go to staff first to present your case. If that does not work, then go to your city or town council. When you present your case, be sure that you have included any legal requirements – DEP regulations, etc. Apply political power only after trying to work through city departments. Build a good working relationship with city or town manager first. Be sure to have a broad cross section of input and buy-in from the public.

**What information or training would help you in the future? What are you up against now?** Theresa: "You learn something new every day. We are constantly calling experts from all over. It helps to have a big committee. Right now we are doing rope fencing to help restore dunes from Patriots Day storm. Some of the dunes need to be replanted. Volunteers will do that. You have to pick and choose the highest priority items and then see how the request goes. Look to the long term. It's hard to keep volunteers motivated and coming back." Summaries of meetings are sent and members can e-mail back. Stress e-mail and phone calls.

Jeff: "Department of Environmental Protection is useful and supportive. Go to their web site and contact them. Bring in experts. Get a geological survey."

**Audience Members:** The Wells experience is absolutely opposite. Everything is driven by regulations. It is one of the most populated beaches in Maine in the summer – with kids, volleyball players, beach cleaning – all must be done according to regulations. There are people patrolling for birds every day and documenting everything. Human wellbeing/enjoyment is not the priority. Finding funds to do all the regulatory work as well as pay for policing of pets is a major challenge. South Portland has been able to develop rules with neighbors -- Wells is different. There have been threats and a very oppositional and extremely difficult relationship has developed. Property owners have been eliminated from participation and input. It was noted that Wells beach is a regional resource – Willard is more of a neighborhood. Drakes Beach is about the same size as Willard Beach. One of the differences may have been that we had Theresa with knowledge, time and passion, and a city manager who was willing to work with the committee and was enthusiastic.