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Trying to fix a beach

Man wants to restore East Harbor park's beach to former condition

By KRISTINA SMITH
Staff writer

DANBURY TOWNSHIP -- When Dick Taylor was growing up in the 1960s, he and his family spent their summer weekends at East Harbor State Park's beach.

The sand stretched for two miles and was always packed with people, said Taylor, 53, a lifelong Findlay resident.

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"It was probably the best swimming beach on the Great Lakes and certainly on Lake Erie," Taylor said. "It was almost a religious experience to go there."

But in 1975, a series of strong nor'easters flooded the beach and carried a section of sand out into the lake. Since then, a rock revetment below a parking area has taken the place of a 9,000-foot stretch that

Taylor and other generations once enjoyed.

As Taylor continued to visit the area as an adult, he grew more frustrated at the partial beach loss. In 2004, he formed Beachaid-Eastharbor, a group that is advocating for its restoration and hopes to raise money to help make it happen.

"I see that rock wall that once was a beautiful beach, and it turns my heart," said Taylor, who has a degree from Ohio State University in parks and recreation administration and is facilities manager at the Findlay Public Library. "It's an emotional attachment that you can't measure. We ought to fix it before we pass it on to the next generation."

The Great Lakes Aquatic Habitat Network and Fund recently awarded his group a \$2,500 grant to further its cause. Taylor plans to use the money to recruit members and advertise his message.

Although the beach re

mains a popular destination, Taylor said attendance dropped after the 1975 storms and has never reached its past annual numbers.

Dave Ferguson, assistant park manager, and John Watkins, chief of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Office of Coastal Management in Sandusky, did not have past attendance figures.

"East Harbor Park beach was the main attraction in this area and northern Ohio," Taylor said. "People miss that. It could very well be the connecting fiber that keeps people coming back."

A series of rock breakwaters installed in 1980 to keep the beach from flooding and moving into the Middle Harbor marsh has created the shallow swimming area that exists today. Taylor remembers the extended beach had more depth.

"It was just a nice gradual beach where you could find shallow water to toddle

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BEACHAID-EASTHARBOR

Beachaid-Eastharbor advocates the restoration of East Harbor State Park's beach.

The swimming area is popular summer destination. It included another 9,000 feet of sand until storms caused flooding that destroyed a section in 1975.

For information, visit www.beachaid-eastharbor.com or write to Beachaid-Eastharbor, P.O. box 605, Findlay, OH, 45840.

For information on East Harbor State Park, visit www.eastharborstatepark.org.

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Photos by Jonathon Bird/News Herald

A set of stairs leading down to the beach at East Harbor State Park covered with sand. Behind the stairs is the First Aid/Life Guard stand. A sign, making passers-by aware of an effort to refurbish East Harbors beach, is seen on Ohio 269 in Danbury Township Wednesday.

and deep water to swim in for adults," he said. "Now we essentially have a wading beach."

Taylor said the sand and sandbars where the former beach was located are still near shore, but the revetment and rocky shallow area are keeping them from moving back to their natural state.

He believes the rock wall, which he said ODNR installed in 1957, caused the beach to disappear. When the storms caused the flooding, it created a scouring effect that pushed the sand out.

ODNR created the problem, he said. He wants the agency to take an active role in fixing it.

"I'm basically running into a brick wall," he said. "They don't want to spend the money to dredge and put sand back in."

ODNR officials, however, said they do not know whether the wall caused the problem or if its removal would solve it. Dave Ferguson, East Harbor assistant manager, also said ODNR did not add the revetment until after the 1975 storms because it wanted to preserve what was left.

John Watkins, chief of ODNR's Coastal Management office, said he does not know when the wall was installed.

Watkins said the park is working with his office to apply for grant funding to address the beach issue. East Harbor officials plan to hire a consultant to review the area and determine what work must be done to restore the beach, he said.

He said he does not know how much that project might cost or how much grant funding the park could get.

"I don't think there's any doubt we'd like to see some of the beach come back," Ferguson said.

ODNR just doesn't have the money to do it, he said. Each state park has cut back to meet a decreasing budget.

"Taking care of what we have versus something additional is a real issue," he said. "You've got to pay personnel. You've got to pay to replace vehicles that are used for maintaining the restrooms. It's a vicious circle."

Taylor, however, argues the state has money because it spent millions to buy most of North Bass Island in 2004 and parts of Middle Bass Island.

"If it costs a few million to fix (the beach), that's nothing," he said. "Instead, the state is buying land and property on the islands that people have to take a ferry to get to them."

Watkins said his office is willing to work with Taylor, but ODNR's Parks Division ultimately will decide what to do with the beach.

"We enjoy the fact that there is somebody who cares a great deal about our parks and wants to see increased access out there," he said. "I think his heart is in the right place."

State politicians also have pledged to help with the project. Sen. Randy Gardner, R-Bowling Green, said he and Rep. Chris Redfern, D-Catawba Island, have advocated the restoration since the volunteer group Friends of East Harbor State Park suggested it years ago.

"It's absolutely something we ought to discuss and see if there's a way to achieve," Gardner said.

Redfern said he has talked to ODNR Director Sean Logan about improving the beaches at East Harbor and Crane Creek State Park in Benton Township. He said he would continue to lobby Logan for financial support.

"Local nonprofit organizations don't have the capability to raise hundreds of thousands to refurbish East Harbor State Park," Redfern said. "We'll do whatever we can within our means to help find the resources. I simply can't promise that it will happen this year."

The Friends of East Harbor State Park could not be reached for comment.

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