

The Boston Globe

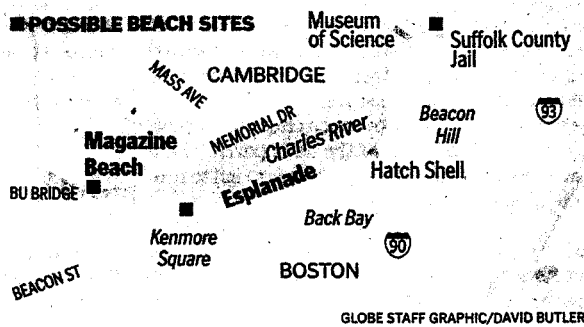
MONDAY, JULY 18, 2005

City & Region



John DeVillars, a former EPA administrator, jumped into the Charles River yesterday, before taking a Duck Tour for possible beach sites.

Charles River Conservancy
One Education Street
Cambridge, MA 02141
(617) 619-2850



GLOBE STAFF GRAPHIC/DAVID BUTLER

Plunge evokes the good ol' days

Advocates scouting for beach along Charles

By Franco Ordonez
GLOBE STAFF

Ruth Golden remembers, decades ago, when her mother would stuff a picnic basket with sandwiches and the family would pile into their Packard and drive to a small beach in Waltham. Golden, 87, said her brother would bolt out of the car upon arrival, while she would wait for her mother to help put inflatable "water wings" on her arms so she could safely chase him into the Charles River.

It was 1925, Golden was 6 years old, and the Charles River was a favorite weekend escape for thousands of Bostonians and Cantabrigians seeking refuge from the swel-

tering summer. It wasn't until 1955 that awareness of the risks of swimming in contaminated river water became clear, and the beaches along the river were closed and replaced with pools.

"It was the primary place that people could get away from their five-story walk-ups," said Karl Haglund, author of "Inventing the Charles River."

Now, 50 years after lifeguards called children out of the water for the last time, river advocacy groups say the Charles is clean enough for recreational swimming. All that's needed is a safe place for a beach.

To make their point, several advocates yesterday dove into the river near Nashua Park, at a ceremony attended by local legislators and government officials announcing efforts to locate a public access point on the river suitable for swimming.

CHARLES RIVER, Page B4



This popular beach near Mount Auburn Cemetery was run by the City of Cambridge in 1925.

'We want the kids swimming off the beaches of the Charles River. Let's get it like it used to be. There are still people in Cambridge who talk about swimming in the Charles.'

REPRESENTATIVE ALICE WOLF
Cambridge Democrat

Advocates scout for safe beach site along Charles

► CHARLES RIVER
Continued from Page B1

"We want the kids swimming off the beaches of the Charles River," said state Representative Alice Wolf, a Cambridge Democrat, who filed legislation calling for a commission to study the water quality and potential swimming sites along the Lower Charles. "Let's get it like it used to be. There are still people in Cambridge who talk about swimming in the Charles."

Wolf and Representatives Peter J. Koutoujian, a Waltham Democrat, and Martha M. Walz, a Boston Democrat, joined the activists and members of the Environmental Protection Agency on a Duck Tour to view where river swimming took place in the past and to scout possible future sites.

It will be several years before sun worshippers find themselves spreading their towels on sandy beaches, the advocates say. Government officials are concerned about the impact of storm runoff and hazards such as debris in the water and boat traffic.

Construction of a beach would also pose challenges in dealing with erosion and soil contamination. "The water quality is good," said state environmental affairs Secretary Stephen Pritchard, "but what I'm concerned about is people jumping in with all these boats around."

Advocates say they are confident that measures can be taken to ensure the safety of swimmers as well as boaters. Potential beach sites include an area outside of Nashua Park in front of the Suffolk



COLLECTION OF WILLIAM MARCHIONE

One of the bathhouses, seen in 1907, that were constructed and maintained by the cities of Boston and Cambridge along the Charles River. Advocates say the Charles is safe for swimming, but want a safe site for beachgoers.

County Jail and along the Esplanade. But the most promising location would involve restoring the once-heralded Magazine Beach in Cambridge across from Magazine Street.

"It's like you have the meal, but you don't have a fork to eat it," said Renata von Tscharnert, president of the Charles River Conservancy, which sponsored yesterday's event. "The water is swimmable, but we have to make sure the peo-

ple can get to the water safely." Ten years ago, the Environmental Protection Agency launched a decade-long effort to make the polluted Charles River clean enough for swimming.

At the time, swimming was safe only 19 percent of the time. Last year, the Charles was safe for swimming 54 percent of the time, according to the Charles River Watershed Association. The Lower Charles, east of the Longfellow

Bridge, met state swimming standards all last summer. "In the 1970s you were advised to get a tetanus shot if you fell into the river," said John DeVillars, former EPA regional administrator, who launched the river cleanup project in 1995. "But now it's swimmable except after a major storm."

The groups say there are only a few more hurdles to clear before river swimming is a reality again

in Boston. And they believe they owe that future to the Boston-area residents who have few beach options. "These are people who can't afford to go to the Cape. They can't afford to go to Maine," said Haggund. "They're stuck in the city. And if we don't provide them with some form of recreation then they have nothing."

Pamela Ordones can be reached at fordones@globe.com.