South Shore Beach Alternatives: Reasons to Head South

AT A GLANCE

Healthy and swimmable beaches in the Milwaukee area could potentially add an estimated $1 million annually in direct economic impact if residents were not deterred by poor water quality. About 16 percent of Milwaukee County residents, approximately 153,000 people, avoid city beaches due to water quality concerns each year.

Research conducted by Wisconsin Sea Grant and UW-Milwaukee’s School of Freshwater Sciences found that poor water quality was the number one reason people do not visit Lake Michigan beaches. Visits to urban beaches with poor water quality, including South Shore Beach, are associated with significantly less consumer spending than destination beaches with higher water quality, suggesting a missed economic opportunity.

More than fifteen years of water quality research demonstrates that the area just 150 meters to the south of the current South Shore Beach site has 40 times better water quality. Water circulation studies show more water movement in this area compared to the current beach site. In addition, runoff from the parking area has been a major contributor to poor water quality at the beach. Large investments are already being made to reduce runoff and improve water quality throughout the marina. Ultimately though, moving South Shore Beach south to a site with better water circulation would provide the best opportunity to have a swimmable beach.

Water Quality Perception Deters Beachgoers

Lake Michigan beaches in Wisconsin are often perceived as having poor water quality, when in fact, only a few routinely experience water quality impairments leading to beach advisories or closures.

A survey of approximately 1,000 potential beach visitors at six Lake Michigan beaches and in a mix of Milwaukee County neighborhoods during 2014 and 2015 provides useful insights for beach managers and policymakers concerned with the state of Wisconsin’s Lake Michigan beaches. More than one in three people surveyed in Milwaukee County neighborhoods reported that they never visit Lake Michigan beaches. Of those people who never visit, approximately 43 percent state poor water quality as the reason (Figure 1). These negative perceptions result in lost revenue for local businesses and weaken the connection between citizens and their local freshwater environment.

Furthermore, the survey revealed that the public is willing to invest to improve beach water quality. When asked about their annual willingness to pay (WTP) for improved beach water quality, potential Milwaukee County beachgoers responded with an aggregate WTP of $33.4 million.

Capitalize on Investments at South Shore Park

In recent years, significant investment at South Shore Park has spurred environmental and economic benefits. By deterring gulls, creating mini-dunes, planting native grasses and installing green infrastructure in parking areas, Park managers have taken steps to reduce bacterial pollution and improve aesthetics along the lakeshore. The re-established South Shore Beer Garden has successfully drawn new visitors with local food and beer offerings. While these investments are steps in the right direction, the full recreational and economic potential of South Shore Beach cannot be realized without offering a consistently clean swimming area.
Move South Shore Beach South

South Shore Beach has consistently high levels of *E. coli*, an indicator recommended by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for monitoring recreational water quality in freshwater by local health departments. The high levels of *E. coli* found at South Shore Beach result in beach closures and health advisories that can span over 60% of the days from June through August and warn beachgoers to avoid the beach due to human health risks.

The ideal location for a beach in the South Shore Park area would have a lower amount of direct runoff and maximum water circulation. Research from the McLellan lab and Wisconsin Sea Grant provides compelling arguments to move the beach to an area south of the current site (Figure 2).

- For over a decade, a clear trend in the data demonstrates that any impacts from fecal pollution—human sewage, boat sanitary tanks, gulls, wildlife, or river water from the harbor—are lower at a proposed beach site which is ~150 meters south of the current swimming beach.
- A higher degree of water exchange at the southern site contributes to improved water quality at the proposed site. In summer, prevailing currents are from the south, which move cleaner water into the proposed site.
- Human contamination was detected more frequently at the current beach and at higher concentrations as compared to the proposed site. Moving the beach would result in lower health risks from low levels of sewage.

Moving South Shore Beach south provides a solution to a serious public health problem. Park decision-makers should consider that a swimmable South Shore Beach would be a clear success for Milwaukee as it continues to improve water quality, revitalize neighborhoods, and bring the city to the forefront of livability. Water quality is the top cited reason that Milwaukee County residents avoid Lake Michigan beaches and that issue is fixable at South Shore Beach.

Moving the beach is a straightforward approach to more swimmable days during the summer season, and additional economic impact. Beach visit expenditures are 75 percent higher at Bradford Beach, another County beach, which has benefited from investments in water quality and amenities.

**Conclusion**

Chronic water quality impairments at South Shore Beach represent both a loss of revenue for local businesses and a lost recreational opportunity and connection between residents and their local freshwater environment. Poor water quality continues to deter potential beachgoers from visiting Lake Michigan beaches according to recent research conducted by Wisconsin Sea Grant and UW-Milwaukee’s School of Freshwater Sciences. An estimated $1 million annually in direct economic impact could result if Milwaukee County residents were not deterred by poor water quality. Moving South Shore Beach ~150 meters south would provide the highest potential for a swimmable beach and additional revenue to local Milwaukee businesses. Moving the beach south is a small price to pay to improve a significant recreational asset.

**References and Readings**