2024 Laketown Beach Access Task Force Report

Short Term Recommendations

This task force and the recommendations were prompted by a community survey and was identified as a priority for improvement.

Mission

The mission of today mirrors the previous task force report commencing in late 2002 and finalized in 2003: “The Laketown Beach Task Force was created by the Laketown Township Parks and Recreation Commission to ascertain problems and concerns relating to Laketown Township concerns”.

Previous Concerns

Many of today’s concerns were identified in the previous report. The erosion issues identified were the increase in size of the sand bowl next to the DeWitt property to the north and the former King property along the North side of the stairs, the East side of the dune adjacent to the parking lot, and the Western dune slope closest to the steps.

The previous task force also identified trespass concerns on the property owned by Halcyon Hills. Noise and vandalism were also addressed by this task force.

Today’s Concerns

The erosion on the North side of the park between the stairs and the DeWitt property has continued with a deeper bowl being formed and more dune sand being eroded from each side of the bowl. Most of the previous plantings of grasses have been eroded away from these sides while the shrubs planted on the east side by the parking lot and towards the top of the dune have mostly survived and have grown to be effective windbreaks in several areas. The sand around the remaining plantings have been washed away from walking on the dune and from weather. The wind has blown the lighter sand from the West side of the dune and deposited it on the North and East side. This is a natural occurrence and should be taken into consideration with remediation of the issues. The sand deposited from the wind has covered the top of the stairs, the stairway from the boardwalk to the top of the stairs and the boardwalk. There are a few places where the stair posts are visible through the sand. Because of the sand covering the top of the stairs, people have been exiting from

the last usable steps toward the top and descending through the dune to the “official path”. This is creating wide paths where the plantings have been displaced in multiple areas. These paths cannot be attributed to deer. The sand has also covered the entrance stairs from the parking lot and has been dug out yearly with sand banks approaching the top of the handrails and covering them in places. The posts that were installed on the parking lot side are totally covered with sand. The grass plantings on the East side are well established with paths from deer noted between the grasses. There are many signs spread throughout the East side of the dune but many are covered by grasses and are hard to see. Near the beach, there are fence posts that were placed for fencing years ago that are currently sand-covered and the tops are exposed through the sand.

Beach trespass, dune trespass, and resulting erosion and damage on Park property, on Halcyon dune and beach property to the west and south, and on DeWitt/ Vandermeulen property north of the park increased after 2014 when state subsidies ended for county/ community policing.

The stairs have been inspected by Dune Restoration Services (DRS), a company located in South Haven, and have been deemed in disrepair and suggested that the stair use be discontinued. Closing the stairs would not keep visitors from using them as it is still the easiest way to ascend the dune and the suggestion from DRS was to repair the stairs.

The trespass concerns and dune damage continues to occur on the South side of the stairs, but has been improved by Halcyon Hills with signs, restored boundary fencing, snow fencing for sand capture within the dune which also discourages people running down the dune, and with tree plantings at the lakeside. Nonetheless, visitors still break through the fencing or climb to the top of the dune from the parking lot and run down. The encroachment from people on the beach continues during high visit times particularly if no policing is present at the Park or on the beach. These issues continue to be addressed by the Township Manager, Halcyon Hills and Allegan County Police Department.

Noise and vandalism concerns are mostly of concern during high traffic periods during the summer months. The life preserver at the beach was taken by an individual during the summer and was reported to the town manager. The vandal was spotted on the camera installed at the parking lot and the life preserver was retrieved. The camera is considered to be an effective tool to manage both of these issues. The neighboring homes close to the park are crucial to the reporting of these issues to the Sheriff’s office. The Beach Traffic and Parking Task Force has more information regarding the cooperation between the town and the Sheriff’s office.

The trespassing, noise and vandalism concerns were only marginally addressed by this task force as most of the issues have been addressed by Halcyon Hills and the township

manager. These issues can be readdressed as needed in the future. One of our recommendations for remediation should help with some of the trespassing issues.

Short Term Recommendations

The following recommendations are for issues that can be addressed immediately or within the next few months.

1) Obtain the plan of action for all dune stairs and restoration from Dune Restoration Services. This should include repair of stairs, removal and replacement of the current stairs and restoration of vegetation on the dune.
2) Repair current stairs to remove dangerous issues
3) Open an area in the handrails on the north side near the top of the stairs before the area that is covered in sand. Some steps at this location will have to be built to exit at that point
4) Place appropriate snow fencing from the exit at the top of the stairs to direct visitors away from walking on the dune. This should be double sided and connect to the main path
5) Line main path where necessary with fencing to keep visitors from walking on the dune
6) Plant vegetation in areas that are not visitor paths. Spring planting of grasses and shrubs
7) Remove/cut the sand covered fence posts that are exposed on and near the beach
8) Reevaluate the signage for better messaging. Remove ineffective signs due to placement and coverage by plants and sand
9) Replace fencing on the East side closest to the parking lot to discourage visitors from climbing the dune
10) Work with the Fire Department on signs stating fires are prohibited. We suggest a fine imposed for violators. Post the emergency number for Fire/Police in several locations where cell service is available. Current Laketown Township WiFi service is only available to the public in the parking lot. Password is not needed for this service. Speak to Fire Department regarding appropriate storage for shovels at or near the beach for quick action to cover a fire.
11) Build a protective barrier behind and extending above the railing on the South side of the stairs from the parking lot to serve as a shield from blowing sand onto the stairs.

Other Thoughts:

There was a suggestion from Dune Restoration Services to plant trees, shrubs and grasses. Tree plantings require frequent watering during their first year to become established and this task is unreasonable for this location. The previous plantings of trees during the first year post-original staircase being installed have all but disappeared. Replacement trees are not recommended.

The current stairs need to be repaired and must be maintained until replacement stairs can be installed. At that time, the stairs that remain above the sand should be removed to prevent climbing up the dune in the non-designated areas. Buried stairs and platforms should not be disturbed.

Beach Access Task Force Members:

Mary Jo Bertolino- current Parks Commissioner

Anne Brand- former member and Parks Commission Treasurer

George DeWitt- Laketown Resident

Linda Kazanova- Laketown Resident

12/18/2024