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Port committee to study lifesaving devices, signs, programs in aftermath of teenager's recent death

Port Washington Mayor Tom Mlada on Tuesday announced the formation of a Waterfront Safety Ad Hoc Committee to find ways to make the lakefront safer in the wake of the drowning of 15-year-old Tyler Buczek on Sept. 2.

"Coming out of that tragedy, I think there was a real rallying in the community," Mlada told the Common Council, noting beach safety has become a popular topic since that day.

The committee is expected to recommend actions that can be implemented by next summer, he said.

The committee is a way "for something good to come from something so tragic and sad," Mlada said, as well as decrease the risk that a similar tragedy will occur again.

"While we have an incredible asset near us, there is real risk," he said. "We need to look at what other communities up and down the lakeshore are doing and what could potentially work for us."

The committee would do well to look across the lake to Michigan for examples of what can be done.

For example, in Grand Haven, across the lake from Port Washington, life rings can be found on the piers and along the beach. Signs about rip currents are found on the life ring stands, and an alarm automatically sounds whenever one of the rings is removed.

Call boxes can also be found at the base of the piers and on the beach because cell phones don't always work there.

An award-winning video that talks about waterfront safety was created and more than 11,000 copies distributed to individuals and community groups across the region as well as every public and parochial school, college and library in Michigan.

And an annual beach survival challenge helps bring the message home to area residents.

It's all part of the work done by the Great Lakes Beach and Pier Safety Task Force, a group that includes representatives of state, local and federal agencies.

"We felt that if we were the model, others could learn from what we did," said Vicki Cech of Grand Haven, who became the face of the group after her 17-year-old son Andy Fox drowned in Lake Michigan off the Frankfort Beach in 2003 — one of three drownings there that year.

"Our sheriff's department says ours is the safest beach in Michigan now," she said.

Awareness was the biggest goal from the start, Cech said, noting few people knew what rip currents were or that they occurred in Lake Michigan when her son died.

"Awareness is the big thing. You've got to be prepared. If you know what to do, you can get yourself out," she said. "My son did exactly what you shouldn't. He tried to swim directly back in and wore himself out."

One of the group's first initiatives was to place life rings on the beach and pier, she said, noting there are now 15 rings on the pier and six across the beach.

"There wasn't one to throw to my son that day," Cech said. "I picture my son out there pleading for help, and nobody had anything to throw to him. It's heartbreaking."

She lobbied state legislators to make it a crime to remove the life rings without reason.

An alarm notifies authorities when a life ring is lifted, and a camera photographs whoever removes it — an effort to reduce theft, Cech said.

It hasn't always been easy, Cech said, noting that the group had to raise funds to finance its efforts and deal with issues such as liability, but it's been worthwhile.

"The community's been very supportive," she said, adding that people have let her know the group's work has saved lives. "I always said if I could save one person it would be worth all the time and work."

Her advice to Port's new committee is simple.

"Don't get discouraged," said Cech, who added the group is available to help communities like Port. "It's really hard. But be persistent. You have to stick to your guns."

Josh Mills, city superintendent in Frankfort, Mich., said his community recently installed informational signs about rip currents and how to deal with them, in addition to installing life

rings and throw bags on the breakwater and piers and shoreline.

A cell phone powered by solar panels that automatically call 911 has also been installed in weatherproof boxes on a deck platform at the base of the beach, he said, ensuring people can reach authorities when needed.

The initiative, which was funded locally, came after a 15-year-old boy was washed off the city's breakwater and drowned in 2000, he said.

Community involvement is a key to success, Cech said.

Port Washington's Waterfront Safety Ad Hoc Committee will have about 20 members — including representatives of the Port Washington-Saukville School District — and be led by residents Barbara Bates-Nelson, Becky Perez and Kevin Rutser, each of whom has different ideas on how to improve safety at the lakefront, Mlada said.

Bates-Nelson spoke to the Police and Fire Commission last month about designating a safe swimming area, installing signs warning people of the dangers of swimming in Lake Michigan and incorporating lake swimming in school swim lessons.

Perez has a number of curriculum and programming ideas, Mlada said, and Rutser has ideas on improving safety and funding sources.

The group will hold its first meeting at 6 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 10, at First Congregational Church and give an initial report to the Common Council later this month, he said.

Public input will be sought by the group during the six to nine months Mlada said he envisions it will take to come up with its recommendations.

Ald. Jim Vollmar noted that the Port Washington Yacht Club was interested in placing safety devices along the breakwater several years ago, and asked that the committee look at what can be done to make that a reality.