

Breakwater safety plan approved but delays persist

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM

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Council backs installation of life rings, ladders but city needs Army Corps OK

The idea of placing signs and life rings on Port Washington's beaches and breakwater and repairing the breakwater ladders was endorsed Monday by the Common Council.

But aldermen imposed two conditions on the approval — the city must work out a suitable inspection schedule to ensure the safety devices are in working order, and it must reach a licensing agreement with the Army Corps of Engineers allowing the safety measures to be installed on the breakwater.

Both the inspection schedule and licensing agreement are expected to be brought to the council for approval at its Tuesday, July 16, meeting.

Although organizers of the city's Water Safety Advisory Committee had hoped to get the safety measures implemented by the July 4 holiday, they now expect the work to be done shortly after Fish Day on July 20.

The cost of the devices is being paid through fundraising done by the committee, Mayor Tom Mlada, who is the committee chairman, said.

The life rings and ladder extensions — needed because the current ladders from the breakwater to the lake do not reach the water and are missing rungs — will be supplemented with life vests kept in a station at the marina.

The safety devices are only a supplement to the education and awareness programs being established by the committee, Mlada added.

The committee is working to establish a daily inspection schedule for the life rings, a weekly check and inspection of life vests and a biweekly check of the ladders on the breakwater, Mlada said.

He said a tentative schedule calls for the life rings on the beach to be checked by members of the police department reserve unit, park and recreation staff and committee members, while the rings on the breakwater would be checked by the reserves and committee members.

The Fire Department's dive team would check on the ladder extensions during their biweekly practices, Mlada said.

Ald. Kevin Rudser, a member of the committee, noted that the inspections will likely be done regularly during the peak season, from April 1 through Oct. 31, and less often during the winter months, when conditions may make it treacherous for people to check the devices.

"It doesn't pay to have someone go out there and risk their lives to check on these," he said.

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“But you can have nice days in November or February when you can check these and not put yourself at risk.”

The committee had considered removing the life rings during the winter months, he said, but Fire Chief Mark Mitchell recommended keeping them out, Rudser said.

“People do fish, walk their dogs and spend time out there in the off-season,” he said.

While some people fear the safety equipment may be stolen, that is not the experience reported by other lakeshore communities that have them, Rudser said.

“Theft has been very minimal,” he said.

Several aldermen expressed concern about the idea of having volunteers inspect and maintain the devices. Volunteers are committed to the cause, they said, but employees who take on the duties as part of their job are a better choice.

“I’m all for inspections, but I would feel more comfortable if these were city employees,” Ald. Paul Neumyer said. “This is important. It has to be inspected correctly.”

Ald. Mike Ehrlich agreed.

“It’s a lot of responsibility,” he said.

Ald. Bill Driscoll said he would like to discuss having some of the marina staff look after the devices.

“It seems like a natural fit,” he said.

Mlada said the committee had looked at volunteers in part because it is trying to minimize any cost to taxpayers for the safety initiatives.

Ald. Dave Larson, who in the past has expressed concern the city could be opening itself up to additional liability if it installs the safety measures, said he has changed his mind.

“I think we all want to do something. My only concern is the whole liability end,” he said. “But maybe we just should chalk it up to living in a litigious society. I’d rather take on the responsibility of doing something.”