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How Public Are “Public” Beaches?:

Exploring Accessibility of New London’s Greens Harbor Beach

Public beaches are vital to the community. They provide a much-needed respite from a day’s labor and, during the summer, they are a place to cool off and enjoy the sun. However, for many in Connecticut this may be out of reach as much of Connecticut’s shores are private property. This does not mean there are not any accessible public beaches, however. Greens Harbor Beach is a public beach in New London, Connecticut. It is located on Pequot Avenue, adjacent to Greens Harbor Park. Even beaches that are open to the public, however, may be hard to access for some residents due to lack of public transportation and other reasons. In perusing environmental justice, it is vital to recognize the history of certain regulations may make it easier for some residents to access the beach more readily than others. The City of New London has made a significant effort in making Greens Harbor Beach an accessible public place that the community can readily use. Though much progress has been made, further efforts need to be made in order to make the beach more accessible to underprivileged residents.

Greens Harbor Beach has a troubled history. For many years, New London was not willing to invest money into improving the beach. In 1955, when a storm washed up debris on

the beach, the town did not pay for a professional cleanup. Instead, the recreation director at the time organized a group of kids to clean up what the *New London Day* described as “dangerous and disagreeable debris of many sorts” (The Day). New London was so unwilling to invest money that they exposed kids to dangerous debris. Recently, a massive project went underway to renovate Greens Harbor Beach. It costs the city millions of dollars and went far overbudget due to unexpected costs related to drainage (Smith). This project was not without controversy. The federal government grant did not cover all the costs of the project and many local politicians were furious that they did not approve the funds to cover the costs of this massive renovation (Smith). Despite investment in this project demonstrating that attitudes towards funding public beaches have improved since 1955, current reservations towards spending money indicate New London still has a long way to go.

Though New London is currently more willing to invest in public beaches, its dark past still impacts beachgoers. The city has a history of failing to meet the needs of its community, especially when considering the health and safety of beachgoers. Greens Harbor Beach saw many water quality issues since the industrialization of the Connecticut coast, but public health officials have consistently failed to respond to these concerns (Kahrl 92). Communities of color are disproportionately affected by these issues. In the 1950s and 1960s, poverty and egregious acts of police brutality caused much unrest in these communities (Kahrl 91). Protests erupted in cities across Connecticut over these injustices, and these crowds were met with mass arrests and tear gas (Kahrl 91). Fearing further riots, public health officials in cities like New London felt pressured not to close the beaches when water quality issues arose (Kahrl 92). This was in spite

of the dangerous threat to public health that these beaches posed. Beachgoers reportedly experienced “gastric disturbances” and viral infections (Kahrl 92).

Over half a century later, water quality is still a concern at Greens Harbor Beach. New London has taken a more proactive approach to keeping residents safe. Over the past few years, local officials closed the beach multiple times. This is due to updated guidelines released by the state of Connecticut. These guidelines standardize how water quality is measured. They set action levels for concentrations of certain substances in the water, such as sewage and bacteria, and lay out a procedure for beach closure. The guidelines state that if there is a leakage at a sewage treatment plant nearby, it is recommended to close the beach (Guidelines for Monitoring). Under these guidelines, the beach was closed in July of 2019 after Ledge Light health officials detected higher than acceptable levels of bacteria (Santiago). The article reporting on the closure reflects how water quality issues disproportionately effect poorer communities. While Greens Harbor Beach was closed, Giants Neck Heights beach lifted its ban on swimming (Santiago). Unlike Greens Harbor Beach, however, Giants Neck Heights beach is more exclusive. It has a private beach association and many of the homes surrounding it are worth over a million dollars. Beach associations historically have been discriminatory and serve to exclude those who are not affluent and wealthy and especially people of color (Kahrl 17). Their fees are prohibitively expensive, which is why it is of great importance for Greens Harbor Beach, which is free to use, to maintain good water quality.

Though a beach may be free to access, that doesn’t mean public transportation makes it accessible. Luckily, New London residents have access to the SEAT bus network, New London County’s bus system. Route thirteen’s stop at Montauk Av. & Converse Pl can drop off residents

a block away from the beach (SEAT). Fares are relatively affordable as they are under two dollars per trip and monthly unlimited passes are available but they are costly, so frequent beachgoers might not be able to make as many trips as they desire to because of the expense. Another issue is that the buses do not run on the weekends (SEAT). It appears that the SEAT busses are prioritized towards a work commute as opposed to recreation. A bus is also not the ideal way to go to the beach. Transporting beach equipment like chairs, an umbrella, or large blanket would be cumbersome on public transportation. The SEAT bus company should invest in larger busses to accommodate more travelers and those with excess bags and beach equipment. They should expand their schedule to run routes to the beaches on the weekends, which would provide underprivileged communities access to the beaches.

As far as regulations related to beaches go, New London has many protections granted to public lands like beaches. Greens Harbor Beach is designated as an “Open Space District” (Zoning Map). These areas are regulated public spaces and are deemed “important municipal resources” by New London’s Zoning Council (Zoning Regulations 169). What is more notable is the zoning designations surrounding the beach. Large dwellings that house many people and might be more affordable are not permitted to be built near Greens Harbor Beach. Zoning regulations allow only smaller homes to be constructed in zone R-3 (Zoning Regulations 68). These restrictions make it unlikely that affordable housing will be built near Greens Harbor Beach. Unfortunately, lower-income beachgoers must travel significantly further than affluent beachgoers to enjoy these public spaces. Even more concerning, R-3 is hardly the most restrictive zone for the development of affordable housing nearby. Most of the area is zoned under R-1, which only permits single family homes (Zoning Map). For many Americans, home

ownership is out of reach and by limiting where affordable housing can be built, New London's zoning committee limits who has easy access to the beach.

Commercial ventures near the beach attract beachgoers and spur further investment from both private businesses and the local government. The historic Fred's Shanty Restaurant sits a mere six-minute walk away from Greens Harbor Beach. The New London zoning commission should plan to expand commercial zoning near the beach. While restaurants and shops would have an overwhelmingly positive impact on Greens Harbor Beach, the marina near the beach could drive beachgoers away. The boats block the view of the water and traffic and noise from the marina have proved bothersome to many reviewers on Google. Future zoning regulations should restrict the distance marinas can be located from public beaches to avoid these issues. Currently, the areas near Greens Harbor Beach are in a waterfront development district (Zoning Map). This allows for the construction of marinas, yacht clubs, and other maritime-related businesses. The code was amended in 1986 to allow the construction of restaurants in this zone as well (Zoning Regulations 50). Splitting the zone into different areas for restaurants and other businesses would allow for an improved experience for beachgoers.

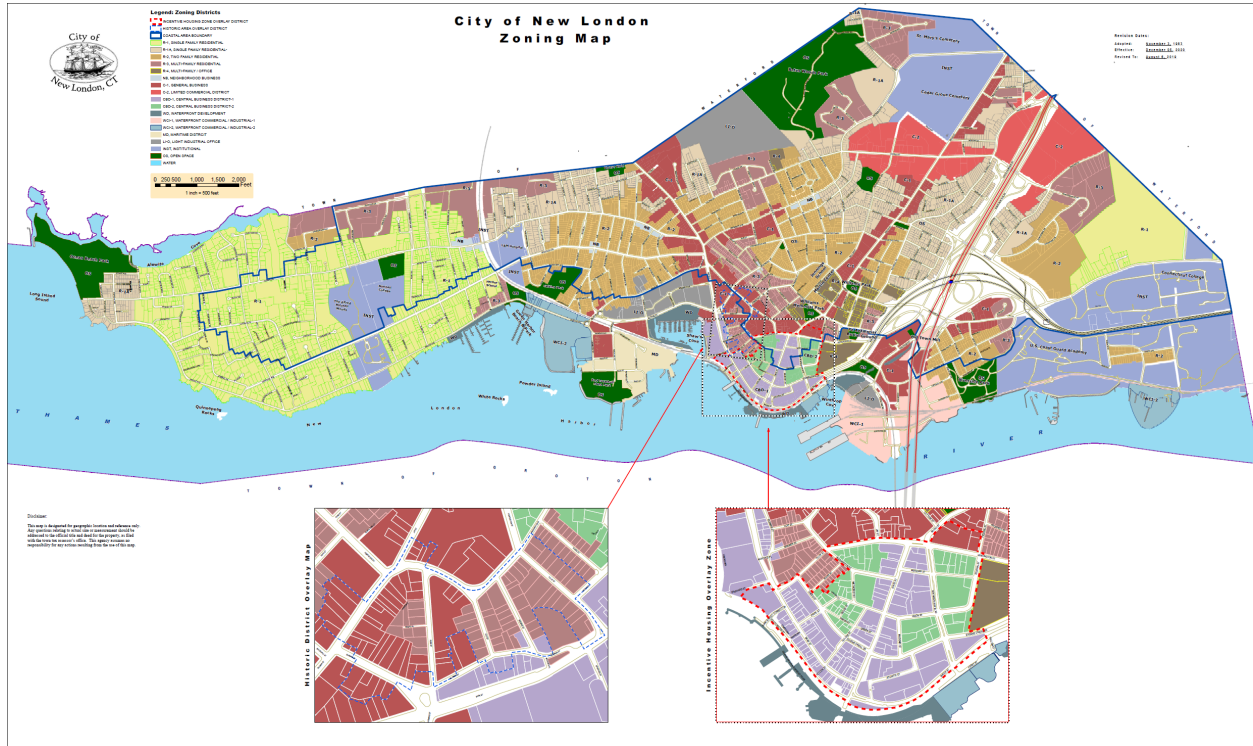
Sources for this project include an array of government documents and newspaper articles in addition to secondary sources such as Andrew W. Kahrl's book *Free the Beaches*. More historical information would have been useful but, unfortunately, newspaper records have not been very thoroughly digitized. Government websites and archives were useful in retrieving information about zoning and water quality policies. There is also a wealth of survey data and satellite imagery that should be useful to incorporate into my presentation. Searching on google for specific file formats such as a PDF file yielded more targeted results. In addition, relying on

background knowledge from living near the area in addition to having gone to the beach itself helped greatly.

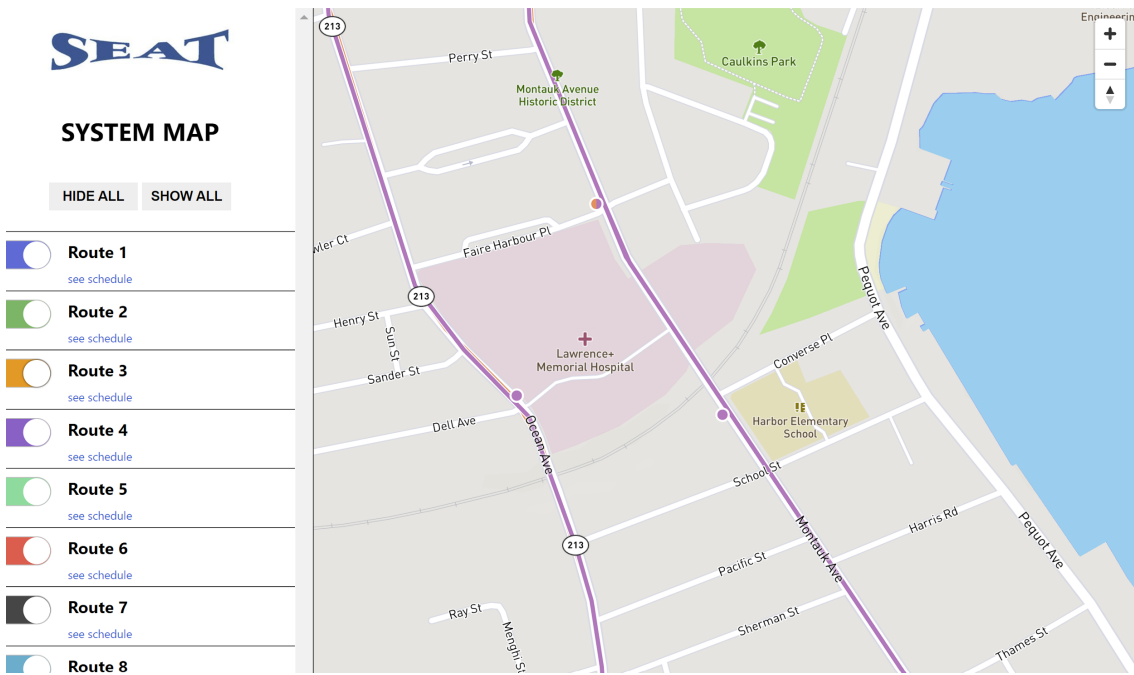
Overall, a combination of water quality issues, inadequate transportation, and restrictive zoning make it difficult for underprivileged people to use Greens Harbor Beach. The construction of affordable housing near the shore would mean a larger percentage of the population of New London could be within walking distance of the beach. The highly restrictive zoning laws make it only possible for wealthier residents to move by the beach. Running the SEAT busses during the weekends would allow for people to enjoy leisure time on their days off. Perhaps having larger busses could accommodate beach equipment as well or having dedicated busses that go to the beaches would be wise. The beach's maintenance should be a priority and the town should be willing to spend a large portion of their budget on recreation. New London should look into federal grant programs or fundraising activities to fund development and cleanup of public beaches. Water quality issues should be taken seriously and the decision to close the beach should follow state guidelines whenever possible. If New London is willing to make the investment, Greens Harbor Beach could be an accessible and enjoyable place for everyone in the community.



Greens Harbor Beach construction project. Photo by Sean D. Elliot/The Day (Smith).



City of New London Zoning Map (Zoning Map)



SEAT Bus Routes (SEAT)

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