

OPINION

Andrea Berggren: Wilmette is changing beach access in a cruel move



A person walks at Wilmette's Gillson Park beach as leaves change colors on Oct. 12, 2022. (Erin Hooley/Chicago Tribune)



By **ANDREA BERGGREN**

May 26, 2024 at 5:00 a.m.

In the three years since my husband, dog and I moved from Chicago's South Loop to Wilmette, we have grown to embrace this village. From the tree-lined streets and historic architecture to the dog-friendly businesses downtown, it's a great place to live.

Yes, its reputation is as part of the affluent North Shore, but we have learned that this is not a snobby community. And the definitive proof is also its crown jewel: Gillson Park's beach. The beach is run by the Wilmette Park District. Before we even closed on our house, we drove to the beach and marveled at the November sunset from the parking lot. From then on, we and our dog have walked the beach in all seasons. Whether the waves were frozen to the shore, or the rain created a mist, or the sun was shining, we and our dog reveled in the natural beauty of the area.

When summer came our first year here, I learned the rules. One area of the beach was roped off and deemed the "swimming beach"; it permitted swimming within boundaries patrolled by teenaged lifeguards. This area also included a concession stand, locker rooms and other amenities. The Park District charged beachgoers a fee for entering this part of the beach Memorial Day through Labor Day. I bought season beach passes for this area but quickly realized that I preferred the free area, now called South Beach, mostly because I could walk there freely with my leashed dog, as I did all the other months of the year.

Over these last three summers, I saw large immigrant families enjoying a day at the beach with their children, speaking many languages. I saw teenagers in groups, flirting and tossing Frisbees. I saw elderly couples sitting on the benches that lined the outer portion of the beach. I met a man with a big, friendly dog named Stella, who was a regular, like me. I met an elderly Ukrainian woman with her granddaughter; she escaped persecution during World War II and told me she came to meet dogs.

I saw older dogs, like my own, being walked by their people, dipping their paws in the tide. I brought friends and family, who were enamored of the place. And I started referring to our house as a beach house, even though we live several blocks away. It has been a privilege and a dream to get to enjoy Gillson Park, and I felt proud knowing that Wilmette, my town, was offering this truly amazing place to everyone, whoever they were, wherever they came from.

But this summer will be different. Recently, we noticed [a fence encircling the entire beach](#) and blocking access and views from the benches at the outskirts. After doing some research, I learned that the Park District has decided to charge people to access the formerly free South Beach, and it will now also be [designated as a swimming beach](#), meaning leashed dogs will no longer be allowed and people will not be able to enter and enjoy the beach freely.

The stated reason is that in the past, when South Beach prohibited swimming, there were allegedly too many people who were breaking the rules and verbally harassing the teenage lifeguards. I was never aware of such incidents. But why must we all be punished for the actions of a few?

In addition to being heartbroken that my dog and I are effectively barred from using the public beach that our tax dollars support, I am shocked at the blatant discrimination of this new plan. One Park District executive told me that this is what Wilmette residents want and that it's "more user-friendly." I disagree. When you commodify a public beach, you discourage its use and prohibit its enjoyment by the public.

And questions remain. I was told that it would be free to "walk the shoreline," as long as you don't sit down or go in the water. How will they monitor that? How will a fence and fee make it safer?

This new plan is unnecessarily punitive and just plain cruel. Many of my neighbors join me in my dismay, and together, [we are planning to fight](#) to keep Gillson Park a welcoming, open and truly public beach.

Andrea Berggren is a content designer and former journalist who has lived in Wilmette since 2021.

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