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Long Branch Councilman Wants Free Beaches For Teens

LONG BRANCH - An ordinance establishing beach access fees for the rapidly approaching summer season remains in limbo over Councilman Brian Unger's insistence that all beachgoers under the age of 18 be allowed free access to the city's public beaches. The ordinance under discussion at recent meetings of the governing body would charge beachgoers between 13 and 17 years of age \$30 for a seasonal badge and \$3 for a daily badge.

Unger, a long-time advocate for public beach access, has framed the debate in socio-economic terms arguing that these fees often restrict access to lower income residents. As evidence he cites the often-witnessed crowds which stream onto area beaches after closing time occurs, and access is free, though other services such as lifeguards disappear for the day.

Unger believes he has the support of Councilman Anthony Giordano, however not everyone on the dais, including Mayor Adam Schneider is swayed by Unger's argument.

"I'm not sure that anybody feels that there is a strong social need here," Schneider said in a telephone interview Monday. "It's an age where at least a couple council people think that if teenagers want to get on the beach let them either purchase the badge or go get a job."

A public hearing and final vote was scheduled for the April 24th council meeting, however it was postponed until May 8th to, as Borough Attorney James Aaron said, allow for "a possibility that changes could be made" to the ordinance.

In a telephone interview Monday, the mayor did not discount the possibility that the two sides could find some sort of common ground before the May 8th meeting.

"There is always the possibility that a compromise could be reached," Schneider said.

When asked, Schneider confirmed that he did make a preliminary offer that could include allowing beachgoers under 18 free access during weekdays, but not on the weekends. In exchange, Unger would support the borough's budget.

"I'm going to say no thank you," Unger said this week about such an offer. "That's just not good enough... either give it (free access) to them or not. I'm not interested in a compromise."

According to Schneider, student beach fees raised approximately \$70,000 last year. "That's a fair chunk of change to give up," he said. Furthermore, he argued that the city's beach fees are amongst the lowest in the area. A quick review of neighboring municipalities seems to support this statement.

Under the current proposed ordinance, anyone over the age of 61 and under the age of 13 can use the beaches in Long Branch free of charge. The fees for those 13 to 17 were laid out earlier and the season badge for adults 18 to 61 would be \$35. Daily badges for that age group would be \$5.

Access at county-operated Seven Presidents Oceanfront Park is \$6 per day for those between 12 and 65 years of age. A season pass to the park at Long Branch's northern end is \$55, or \$20 more than a city season pass. Seniors also must pay \$22 for a senior pass. In Sea Bright a season pass for those between the ages of 12 and 65 years of age is \$100.

In Deal, the seasonal "walk-on" fee is \$125 and a daily admission is \$5 during the week and \$6 for holidays and weekends.

The seasonal rate for the Deal bathhouse is significantly higher.

Bustling Belmar charges \$50 for a seasonal badge for those between the ages of 15 and 62.

A daily badge is \$7 and those 62 and older must pay \$15 for a seasonal badge.

Belmar is unique in that they offer free admission to active servicemen and servicewomen and their dependents through its "Operation Thank You."

At the ordinance's introduction, Unger said he was "very disappointed in his colleagues" lack of support for his suggestion.

"In the face of luxury high-rise development along such a large portion of our beachfront, now is the perfect time to give

something back and let working families and their kids come to the beach and not have to wait until four in the afternoon," said Unger during the April 10th council meeting. "I think it's shameful."

For his part, Schneider counters that by offering free access to minors, the town would lose a chunk of revenue that would need to be made up somewhere else to pay for the services still needed to operate the beach.

"Free is just a word," Schneider said. "The reality of what free means is somebody else is paying for it... you are just shifting the cost to, in this case, the Long Branch taxpayers - it's an issue."

Schneider dismisses discussion that he in fact controls the fate of this debate. The ultimate decision is up to the members of council, he believes. "I'm kind of hoping that they talk amongst themselves to see what they are going to do," he said. "I don't know."

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