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Brian Unger

### Unger: Fees keep families off beaches

Public hearing on fee ordinance set for April 24 at 8 p.m.

BY CHRISTINE VARNO

Staff Writer

Long Branch Councilman and longtime environmental activist Brian Unger thinks beach fees keep families and teens off city beaches and he wants to do something about it.

Unger alone on the council last week voted against an ordinance setting beach fees for members of the public ages 13 through 61 for the upcoming beach season.

Instead, he said in explaining his vote, he believes the ordinance should be tabled and rewritten to provide free beach admission to teens.

"I think the ordinance should be shelved for further discussion," Unger said at the meeting, adding that free admission should be offered to young people ages 13 through 17.

At the April 10 council meeting, ordinance 18-07 was introduced by council by a 3-1 vote, establishing beach fees for the Long Branch shore.

Councilman Anthony Giordano was absent from the meeting and Councilmen Michael DeStefano and David Brown, as well as Councilwoman Mary Jane Celli approved the introduction of the measure.

According to Unger, there are public beaches in Long Branch with free access, but they are located in the Elberon section of the city.

The ordinance states that admission to city beaches will be charged for the summer season, which extends from May 26 through Sept. 3.

The daily fee will be in effect from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., according to Long Branch Director of Recreation Department Carl Jennings.

Daily beach badges will be sold at a cost of \$3 for ages 13 through 17 and \$5 for ages 18 through 61, according to the ordinance.

A seasonal beach pass for individuals between 13 and 17 years of age will cost \$30; and for ages 18 through 61, the cost will be \$35.

Children under the age of 13 and senior citizens over the age of 62 will be admitted without charge, according to the ordinance.

Free admission is also extended to the physically and mentally disabled and veterans, according to the ordinance.

But Unger said he disagrees with charging teens as young as 13 to 17 years old a fee to use city beaches.

"We have not yet researched the revenue that beach fee sales to this group provided to city coffers, but regardless, I believe it is time for Long Branch to extend beach access to our teens," Unger wrote in a letter to The Atlanticville.

In the letter, Unger wrote, "Now, it is difficult for many middle and upper-middle income people to comprehend that \$10 or \$20 or \$30 is a lot of money for families who struggle each month to make rent or mortgage payments, to buy food, pay for gasoline, car payments, health insurance, clothing, etc.

"However, it is a fact of life that for these families, if they have one or two adults and two to three children, a day at the beach is a \$60 proposition."

Along the five-mile Long Branch shoreline, Unger said, the public can only access beaches in Elberon free of charge.

"There are no services at these beaches," Unger said. "There are no facilities and parking is difficult to find."

He added that the free beach areas are most commonly used by surfers and fishermen.

Long Branch Chief Financial Officer Ronald Mehlhorn said it cost the city approximately \$308,000 last year to maintain and staff the beach areas that require a fee for access.

According to Jennings, the total revenue collected by the city in beach fees last summer season was \$389,575.

Fees for students 13-17 generated \$61,140 of the fees collected, according to Jennings, who said 134 students bought seasonal badges at \$30 per badge for a total of \$4,020.

He added that 19,040 students purchased daily badges at \$3 a badge for a total of \$57,120.

At the meeting, Unger said that the beach fees systematically prevent young people living in Long Branch neighborhoods and surrounding communities from going to the beach in the summer.

"They wait around until 4 [p.m.]," Unger said, adding, "I have also noticed families who come after 4."

Acknowledging the recent developments built along the city's shoreline, Unger said at the meeting, that now is the time to give back to the public.

"I am very disappointed with my colleagues here on council," he said. "I think it is shameful."

In his letter, Unger said over the past decade, Long Branch has seen luxury beach clubs with memberships costing in the thousands privatize areas of city beaches.

The boardwalks on the oceanfront are now lined with million dollar-plus condominiums, he wrote, and property prices in Elberon have skyrocketed.

"It is high time and a matter of high public symbolism that we extend beach access rights to our teenagers," he wrote.

Long Branch resident Kevin Brown, of Broadway, agreed with Unger, and said at the meeting, "If the city can not afford to give all of its residents free beach access, can I recommend all our residents under the age 18 and over the age 55 [be permitted] free beach access?"

The public hearing and final vote on the ordinance is scheduled for the April 24 municipal meeting at 8 p.m. in City Hall on Broadway.

Seasonal beach passes will be on sale at the Long Branch Recreation Office on Bay Avenue Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., according to the ordinance.

Beginning Memorial Day, passes can be purchased at the Beach Office on North Bath Avenue on the boardwalk, according to the ordinance, which states that commencing June 16, the seasonal passes will be available on a daily basis at the beach house only from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.



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