

A heartbreaking drowning has awoken Port Washington to the need to take responsibility for the safety of people attracted to its waterfront

The drowning of 15-year-old Tyler Buczek in violent surf along Port Washington's north beach consumed the community in grief. The shock and profound sadness over the loss of that young life is now evolving into a determination to take steps to make such tragic accidents less likely in the future.

We would expect nothing less of the community that in the aftermath of the Labor Day weekend tragedy embraced the Buczek family with an outpouring of emotional support in a moving display of the empathy that unites small towns like Port Washington.

The appointment by Mayor Tom Mlada of a citizens' waterfront safety committee is a good first response to the need for the city to take more responsibility for the safety of the people attracted to its Lake Michigan beaches and harbor.

The committee's purview will need to include the north and south public beaches and the north breakwater pier. Tragedy had not visited the beaches in recent memory before the drowning of Tyler, which came as a jolting reminder that the lake that provides so much enjoyment can be deadly, particularly in the nearshore currents associated with large waves.

The hazards of the breakwater, popular the year around with fishermen and sightseers and the scene of several near fatal events in recent years, have been well documented, but have remained unaddressed. The beach tragedy is a call to action here too.

Some of the features needed to make these waterfront recreation places safer are obvious and basic: throwable flotation devices on the beaches and the breakwater; beach swimming areas defined by buoys to encourage swimmers not to venture too far offshore and to stay well away from the ripwrap wall around the wastewater plant, which seems to add to the turmoil of waves and currents; functioning ladders on the breakwater (as well as in the inner harbor, where existing ladders are so far above the depleted water level as to be useless).

The committee will surely consider other steps as well. A useful guideline can be found in the reporting in last week's Ozaukee Press about the efforts of the Michigan communities of Grand Haven and Frankfort, in both cases in response to the drowning of teenagers, to make Lake Michigan swimming areas safer.

Besides ample lifesaving devices, these communities provide signs explaining the dangers of certain lake conditions, alarms and communication stations to alert emergency services. Of particular interest is their emphasis on education, including wide distribution of a video on Lake Michigan water safety.

Out of tragedy, a lifesaving mission

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The idea of educating the public, particularly young people, in the ways of safely enjoying the lake is already in the mix of options for responding to the beach tragedy here. In a presentation to the Police and Fire Commission, Barbara Bates-Nelson suggested including rough-water swimming techniques in basic swimming instruction for children, an idea that should be pursued.

Just as important as the specific measures of Port Washington's response is an organizational structure to nurture a waterfront safety program into the future.

In time, the pain over the September tragedy that now motivates the community's focus on beach and harbor safety will fade. If the measures that result are to endure, a sustainable plan to maintain and finance the improvements will have to be in place.

Can Port Washington get this done? It has to. Everyone touched by the north beach drowning knows that.