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Surf, sun, sand and smoking

College student campaigns for a smoke-free Sandy Point Beach



Honey Keene, left, and to her right, Kristin Keene, of Middletown, support the smoke-free beach campaign by Helena Touhey, far right. They say many families visit beaches with small children, just as Kristin Keene brought her daughter, Scarlett, who is playing in the sand.



Helena Touhey jots down that Rachel Carraway (with her son Corbin Hayes) thinks a smoking area should be provided.

By Jill Rodrigues

PORTSMOUTH — Her eyes scanning the beach, Helena Touhey toed the sand with her brown flip-flop and uncovered a cigarette filter.

And then another.

During summer break from Goucher College, Ms. Touhey, a 20-year-old political science major and English minor, has dabbled in local politics and in establishing policy.

She's an environmentalist, she says, but while attending Goucher, where she'll be a junior in the fall, she became immersed in a very involved sustainable-living environment. Goucher dorms are equipped with solar panels, and students grow organic food to serve in the dining hall. Leftovers get composted and used as soil for the vegetables in the greenhouse.

Living amidst environmental change inspired her to try to do something in her home town. So in the hours she is not guiding tours of Touro Synagogue (her second summer working there) Ms. Touhey crafted an internship project with the Rhode Island Audubon Society to implement a voluntary smoking ban this summer at Sandy Point Beach.

Ms. Touhey worked with Eugenia Marks, R.I. Audubon Society policy director, on what would be a worthy campaign at the local level. This is the second year the Audubon Society has partnered with the Department of Environmental Management and the Department of Health to make no smoking voluntary at state salt and freshwater beaches. The Audubon Society and state agencies are also writing legislation for an outright ban at state beaches. Together, Ms. Touhey and Ms. Marks thought her project would be a great opportunity to try the same campaign at a town beach.

Smoking at the beach

Over the past few decades, the Audubon Society has sponsored a statewide coastal trash clean-up and had the volunteers write down each piece of debris they found. Those surveys and others done by Audubon Societies in coastal states are sent to the Ocean Conservancy in Washington, D.C. for a statistical analysis that is published in an annual report.

Ms. Marks says that, for Rhode Island, in most of the years since 1985, "cigarette litter has been the number-one item on beaches."

Cigarette butts, empty cartons, plastic wrap-tops, cigar stubs, burnt matches, lighters "you name it and it's half-buried in beach sand.

Besides the health issue of second-hand smoke wafting around those who don't partake in puffing, Ms. Marks says there is real concern for coastal birds eating the filters. Young children stuff cigarette butts in their mouths, too.

An Audubon Society survey this summer of state beach-goers found that 80 percent favor smoke-free beaches. But not all of them were sold on a smoking ban.

Portsmouth goes smoke-free

Ms. Touhey wrote letters to the town administrator and town council explaining her project, and they endorsed it in July. She posted signs like, "Portsmouth wants smoke-free beaches, too" at the library, Clements Market, the post office and Sandy Point Beach.

And then, on the last Tuesday in July, a sunny and hot morning, Ms. Touhey went to Sandy Point Beach to talk about her initiative and find out if people support the idea of a smoking ban at town beaches.

In her opinion, asking the town to designate a smoking area would be "sticky." She thought the beach could use more trash bins, especially in the parking lot where she finds what looks like ashtrays-full of butts dumped in parking spaces.

Beach smoking statistics

The R.I. Audubon Society says smoking at the beach is a health and environmental issue. Toddlers and birds are known to eat cigarette butts. It takes at least five years for a cigarette to break down, and decades for the filter to degrade. The Coastal Conservancy reports that 38 percent of trash removed last year from beaches and coasts was smoking-related.

Results of 2007 R.I. beach smoking survey

- Over half of people are very bothered by smoke
- 81 percent say they're very bothered by cigarette litter
- Almost 10 percent have stepped on lit cigarettes
- 33 percent think smoking should be banned
- 52 percent want a designated smoking area
- Only 12 percent think smoking should not be restricted

