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Rain, bacteria led to beach closures in Newport and Middletown

AQUIDNECK ISLAND - Four days after Middletown's Atlantic Beach was closed on May 31, the state's first beach to be closed this season, it was shut down again along with Newport's Easton's Beach. The closures came after the state Department of Health measured high bacteria counts off the beachfront.

June 4 marked the second time this year that Atlantic Beach had been closed, but it was the first closing this season for Easton's Beach.

Dr. Ernest Julian, chief of the health department's food protection office, said, "History shows that an inch of rain gives us enough [reason] to close [these beaches]." He added that this week's forecast of rain will most likely lead to more closures.

Julian was referring to the storm water run-off's tendency to increase the amount of enterococci, a fecal-coliform bacteria plaguing the stream flowing out between Easton's and Atlantic beaches.

After a recent DNA test at the stream's outfall, the bacteria was attributed to animal waste, according to Middletown Town Administrator Gerald Kempen.

The Rhode Island standard for enterococci is 104 colony forming units per 100 ml of saltwater. When Atlantic Beach was closed on May 31, the bacteria count was 166.

At the stream running into Easton's Beach, the bacteria count was 307. That resulted in a 150-foot-long zone marked for closure. Easton's Beach, however, remained open because it tested well under the limit.

The next day, June 1, Atlantic Beach was re-opened per the health department's recommendation. Julian said that it typically takes 24 hours for beaches to become clean. "The good thing is [with the beaches] being on open ocean, they tend to clean-up quickly," he said.

Last summer, Atlantic and Easton's Beaches were closed on several occasions. Middletown has since been working to prevent closures and, as a result, keep the beaches clean.

One solution proposed by the Woods Hole Group is to move the Esplanade outfall nearly one mile into the ocean. The group was represented by coastal engineer Brian Caufield at the April 16 Council meeting.

He said that the total project cost is not yet known. Caufield did say, however, that the second phase involving data collection would run from \$25,000 to \$50,000.

The project is currently in its second phase as of May 7's Council meeting. The Council approved a \$54,000 contract to Woods Hole for data collection purposes.

Town Engineer Warren Hall also said at that meeting that Esplanade outfall pipes one and two could be tied together to move the discharge further south and away from the beach. The estimated cost of that project is \$180,000.

For up-to-date information on beach closures, go to www.ribeaches.org.

Currently, there are two areas permanently closed to swimming: They are Newport's King Park and a 200-foot buffer zone around the stream emptying onto to Easton's Beach.

BY ANDREW MARTIN