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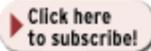
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Arenac County beach sees more people - and weeds

Monday, July 1, 2002

By Helen Lounsbury
TIMES WRITER

Two things are certain on Arenac County's first Lake Huron beach. Use is up. And managers aren't touching wetland sand and weeds.

So say park supervisors after getting recent rebukes from state and federal wetlands regulators for tilling - without a permit - a 30-foot wide swath of beachfront for sunbathers.

Yet if there's a way for Arenac County to make its new Au Gres area beach sandy, managers vow they'll pursue it, legally.

"We're applying for every permit we can apply for," said Al Humpert, Arenac County parks commission chairman. "If they say all we can do is rake, we'll rake. If we can grade, we'll grade. Ideally, we'd like to bring in new sand and make a sandy shoreline."

But for now, that 30-foot lakefront band is protected wetland. The county is forbidden to tamper with weeds inside that perimeter unless permitted by both the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and the Army Corps of Engineers.

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Parks commission members are seeking such grooming permits now, hoping for approval sometime this month. Wetland weeds are the only complaint visitors have about the Au Gres Township beach. On June 22, 500 residents turned out for the park's grand opening.

"Everyone says it's beautiful, with one exception," Humpert said. "They want to know where the sand is. We'd like to give them some."

With luck, the county may be able to at least groom a 30-foot band along the shoreline, state resource managers say. Tawas City Park and the Thumb's Albert E. Sleeper State Park, near Caseville, received permits this year to groom their beaches.

"Just because we require a permit doesn't necessarily mean you can't do it," said the DEQ's Daniel Morgan. "It just means you have to have a justification. In Arenac's case, we'll look at public trust issues."

Arenac still faces two additional conflicts with the Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps, unlike the DEQ, takes issue with the county for a snow fence running along one beach border and a 4-foot wooden walkway extending to the beach. Both structures clear DEQ approval because neither is permanent. But the Army Corps allows no structures, even temporarily, below the high water mark, Corps engineers say.

Arenac County asked for help from U.S. Rep. James A. Barcia, and aides have directed the county to wait until they speak with the Army Corps.

"The fence and walkway are both still up. It's an unfortunate misunderstanding," Humpert said. "We'll work it out to everyone's satisfaction eventually, but for now, Jim Barcia's office said they'd buy a little time."

Arenac is proceeding with non-wetland park improvements almost daily, managers say. They recently added buoy markers for young swimmers. Workers were installing children's swings last week. In days ahead the beach, and Arenac's Oasis Lake park, plan to start selling pop, bottled water and ice cream.

The county purchased the 7.5-acre beach property early this year. A \$900,000 state grant covered most of its \$1.2 million cost.

"We're taking a lot of criticism over the new park," Humpert said. "People say we can't afford it. The way I see it, we got



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\$1.2 million worth of property for \$300,000. All we've put into it for improvements so far amounts to less than \$20,000.

"Now, we're starting to take in money (from users.) I think we should celebrate. It's not every day somebody adds a million bucks of value to Arenac County."

- Helen Lounsbury covers regional news for The Times. She can be reached at 1-800-727-7661.

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