

Beach driving permits for fishing only in North Brigantine Natural Area

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BRIGANTINE _ As soon as you drive onto the beach from 14th Street, the world's a different place.

The tightly packed, three-story homes are left behind. Instead there is just sand, water and sky. It's one of the largest stretches of undeveloped barrier island beach left in New Jersey.

"You do get cut off at certain times," said Andy Grossman, owner of Riptide Bait and Tackle here, as he drove his four-wheel drive truck up the beach Tuesday just after high tide. The high water mark reached to the base of the dunes, so vehicles that made it to the end would have had to wait for the tide to turn before driving back.

The almost two-mile long beach, called the North Brigantine State Natural Area, has been owned by the state since 1967.

But the city has overseen its human use, including selling permits for people to drive on the beach there. The city permit also allows driving on beaches around the South End's jetty and cove.

At the more isolated and less used North End, permit holders could fish, paint, surf, kayak, or just relax with a cup of coffee.

Now all that has changed.

The state Department of Environmental Protection took over permitting for beach driving in the Natural Area as of Jan. 1, after telling the city it would do so about a year ago.

Under its rules, a limited number of state permits are being sold -- \$50 for New Jersey residents and \$75 for non residents -- and the Mobile Sport Fishing Permits are for fishing only. The state will limit access to the area to 75 permit holders per 24-hour period.

"We have not had any rational answer given to us about why they would prohibit certain activities that have taken place there for decades," said Mayor Phil Guenther, of nature and recreational activities other than fishing.

The agreement with the city had expired, according to DEP spokesman Larry Hajna. And the state wants a higher level of protection for beach nesting birds, such as the endangered piping plover that are known to nest there.

He said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was concerned motorized recreation conflicted with protected birds and other wildlife.

"It is a designated Natural Area, and therefore a higher level of resource protection is necessary," Hajna said in an email response to questions.

Guenther said the city always closed the northern half of the Natural Area to vehicles during nesting season from May to September.

Bait shop owner Grossman said he is worried the state may now close the entire stretch of North End beach from May 15 to Sept. 15.

He is relieved that fishing can continue, but he knows a lot of people who enjoyed just driving out for the view.

“That’s why a lot of photographers and artists are upset,” Grossman said. “This is no longer open to them.”

While people can still access the area on foot, without need of a permit, anyone carrying equipment will find the two-mile trek a tough one, Guenther said.

The extreme North End is the only place to get a good view of Little Beach, a small, undeveloped barrier island about 500 yards across Brigantine Inlet from the North point and part of Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge.

According to DEP, Brigantine North is part of the longest stretch of undeveloped barrier island beach in the state, at 9.75 miles when added to Little Beach and Holgate, also part of Forsythe. Island Beach State Park is a similar size at just under 10 miles.

“Quite frankly I don’t see a difference whether you are launching a kayak, going fishing or kite surfing,” said Guenther. “They are not guarded beaches, never have been guarded. All those activities have always taken place on unguarded beaches.”

Guenther said the city is meeting with the DEP Thursday, and hopes to either convince it to allow the city to take back oversight of the Natural Area, or at least allow people to do more than just fish there.

There is also a public meeting with DEP officials set for 6 p.m. Feb. 27 at Brigantine North Middle School.

Another issue is public safety, the mayor said.

When the city had oversight of the area, city police patrolled the area regularly.

Now the patrolling is done by the state, and Guenther said he wants a better understanding of how the state will provide emergency services there.

State data shows piping plover are nesting in North Brigantine, but have declined since the early 2000s.

Four pairs of piping plover nested in the Natural Area in 2017, fledging nine chicks in 2017, according to Christina “Kashi” Davis, an environmental specialist with the state Division of Fish and Wildlife in its Endangered and Nongame Species Program. But in the early 2000s, 17 pairs bred there, she said.

Guenther said the state has not provided the city any proof of problems with the city’s management of the area, other than anecdotal mentions of dogs seen off leash in the area.

He said the city offered to increase police patrols there, but the state declined and instead took over the area management.

He also hopes to resolve a tricky situation involving permits.

To access North Brigantine by vehicle, people have to cross about 1,500 feet of city beach. That means they might also need a city permit, said Guenther.

“That’s one of the reasons we are meeting, to clarify whether state permit owners have to have a Brigantine permit,” Guenther said.

More than 3,000 people bought the city's \$180 annual permits last year, Guenther said. They are \$90 for senior citizens over 60 and free for veterans.

Most were fishermen, said Guenther, but there were also plenty of bird watchers, surfers, painters and nature lovers of all kinds.