

# The Providence Journal

LOCAL

## Barrington got a grant to improve shoreline access. Is it holding up its end of the deal?

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Located in Barrington's Nayatt neighborhood, Bluff Road comes to a dead end near the water's edge. The paved road turns into a well-trodden footpath, leading to a sandy stretch of beach.

But if you're hoping to get out of your car and take a closer look, you'll find yourself stymied by "No Parking" signs.

It's a scenario that's replicated at every shoreline access point in the neighborhood, and in waterfront communities throughout Rhode Island.

Several decades ago, the state came up with a solution: Towns could get grants to improve rights of way by clearing away brush, laying down walkways, and putting in amenities like picnic tables and bike racks. In exchange, they had to take steps to ensure that those sites would be accessible to the public — including providing parking whenever possible.

One of those grants went to Bluff Road. But parking remains banned on nearly every street in the waterfront neighborhood — which has become an increasingly controversial topic in Barrington.

### Town cites 'quality of life' to justify ban on parking

Standing at the edge of Bristol Harbor in May 1989, as sailboats cruised by in the distance, Governor Ed DiPrete announced that the state would soon begin giving out thousands of dollars to towns that wanted to improve public rights of way.

"Free access to the shore has always been considered a birthright by Rhode Islanders," he told reporters. "This program places a high priority on enhancing and opening up access to

the water for all the state's citizens."

Records show that Barrington was awarded one of the first grants: \$5,000 towards "the relandscaping of the public beach access and improvements for erosion control and runoff, and safer access to the beach" at Bluff Road.

As part of the deal, the town had to agree to a set of rules and regulations designed to ensure that public access points were actually accessible to the public. One was a requirement that "the municipal agency shall provide on-side or on-street parking, if possible, at or near the sites listed in the agreement."

**Narragansett:** Council wants survey to look for encroachment on shoreline rights of way

Whether Barrington is keeping up its end of the bargain today depends on how you interpret the words "near," and "possible."

To Barrington town manager James Cunha, there's not much ambiguity: Adding parking to Bluff Road, which is about 21 feet wide, would mean that there's no longer enough room for fire trucks to pass. (There haven't been any incidents in Barrington where fire trucks have been unable to get by parked cars, Cunha said, but homeowners have occasionally found themselves blocked.)

"It says 'if possible,'" Cunha told The Providence Journal. "And it's not possible there."

Ken Block, a former gubernatorial candidate who is a Barrington resident and has been pushing the town to allow parking near shoreline rights-of-way, acknowledges that Bluff is "pretty narrow."

But it intersects with Governor Bradford Drive, which is "plenty wide," he said. Why not add parking there?

In fact, earlier this year, Barrington officials determined that Governor Bradford Drive — and several other streets in the neighborhood — were wide enough to accommodate to parked cars.

But Cunha said that parking bans should remain in place.

**More:** Barrington council resists adding parking near right-of-ways; denies 'classist plot'

Streets in the waterfront neighborhood tend to fill up with people who "want to avoid paying their five dollars or ten dollars" to park at Barrington Beach, Cunha explained this week.

"I'm not worried about the money for the beach, I'm worried about the quality of life for the neighbors," he added.

Cunha also noted that people can park at Barrington Beach and walk to the Bluff Road access point. If you follow the shoreline, the right of way is about 1,000 feet away from the beach parking lot — not much further than Governor Bradford Drive.

**More:** Is this wealthy RI town using parking tickets to limit the public's access to the beach?

Parking at the beach, of course, comes with its own challenges: The lot tends to fill up on nice summer days, and for much of the past two summers, it's been off-limits to non-residents. (In late July of this year, the town began allowing non-residents to park at the beach on weekdays.) There are signs saying that no dogs are allowed.

In Block's view, Barrington's refusal to allow any parking on Governor Bradford Drive "is in opposition, certainly, to the spirit of the DEM agreement they signed."

It's not clear that towns can claim that it's not "possible" to provide parking because it would impose on neighbors' quality of life, Block added.

But even if that were the case, he said, the notion that adding two or three legal parking spots would lead to quality-of-life issues is "impossible to put your head around."

It's already quite common to see cars parked on Governor Bradford Drive, Block pointed out.

So is Barrington upholding its side of the agreement? The Department of Environmental Management, which administered the grants, isn't taking a stance on that.

"Without knowing exactly how the parking situation has changed in Barrington in the last 25 years, if at all, or whether Barrington has determined that it is not possible to provide on-the-street parking closer to the Bluff Road access point, DEM cannot take a position at this time whether Barrington is or is not complying with the terms of their recreation grant agreements," spokesman Mike Healey wrote in an email.

## **Other communities awarded grants, but projects never got off the ground**

Rhode Island's attempt to pay for improvements to public rights of way demonstrated that in some towns, the problem wasn't a lack of funds but a lack of political will.

In 1991, a year after the first grants were awarded, The Journal discovered that many of the projects hadn't gotten off the ground.

In Barrington, for instance, funds were supposed to go towards improving two other public access points in the Nayatt neighborhood — Watson Avenue and Water Way.

But when reporters Peter Lord and Katherine Imbrie paid a visit to the Watson Avenue site, they saw no sign of those improvements.

'No Parking' signs stand where Shoreline Public Access signs were promised, and where there would be ample room to park two or three cars, someone has erected a basketball hoop," they wrote afterwards.

**Warwick:** A little-known deal allows public beach access at Gaspee Point

Similarly, a right of way at Gibson Road in Bristol remained overgrown and unusable.

Bristol's community development director, Geer Oswald, said the plans have been 'put on the back burner' because the Bristol Highlands Association, a neighborhood beach club that owns the land on either side of the public right of way, 'had concerns' about encouraging public use of this public piece of waterfront land," Lord and Imbrie wrote.

A search of The Journal's archives shows that more than two dozen sites in eleven communities were selected to receive shoreline access improvement grants before the program came to an end in 1995. But it's unclear how many of those projects actually came to fruition, which makes it hard to identify instances where towns have an obligation to provide parking.

**Vesterly:** Armed with dusty old maps, activists fight to reclaim beach access in Weekapaug

DiPrete's office had announced in 1990 that Barrington had been "awarded" grants for improvements to Water Way and Watson Avenue. But when The Journal filed a public records request for copies of those agreements this year, nothing turned up.

The grant applications for those two sites "appear not to have been approved," DEM File Review Coordinator Angela M. Spadoni wrote in an email. As for Gibson Road: "There is no signed agreement in the file and no evidence of reimbursement being made."

Dealey noted that there are many possible reasons why grants may not move forward, including "a change in local priorities, local or state staffing changes resulting in a gap of

services, a discovery that the project may in fact cost much more than the community had anticipated, public/local concern about the project, etc."

But there's no one left at the DEM who knows what happened in this case, Healey said, "nor does our documentation of the program provide any answers."