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Will Bradford Beach's Pavilion Be Privatized?

BY VIRGINIA SMALL SEP. 17, 2020 8:39 A.M.

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The open upper deck of Bradford Beach's public pavilion overlooking Lake Michigan might soon be off limits except for patrons of a proposed pricey fine-dining-and-bar establishment and private events. The Dock Bradford, LLC, of Park Ridge, Illinois, a Chicago suburb, has operated Bradford Beach concessions for Milwaukee County since 2019. That includes beverage-and-food sales at three tiki-hut bars on the Milwaukee County beach and the pavilion's lower level, plus volleyball and cabana rentals.

The Dock's management submitted designs to Milwaukee County Parks in mid-March to install a "semi-permanent" bar adapted from a steel shipping container, plus three other repurposed containers along the upper observation deck's western edge. The solid wall of cubed containers would be visible from Lincoln Memorial Drive, the sidewalk and the beach.

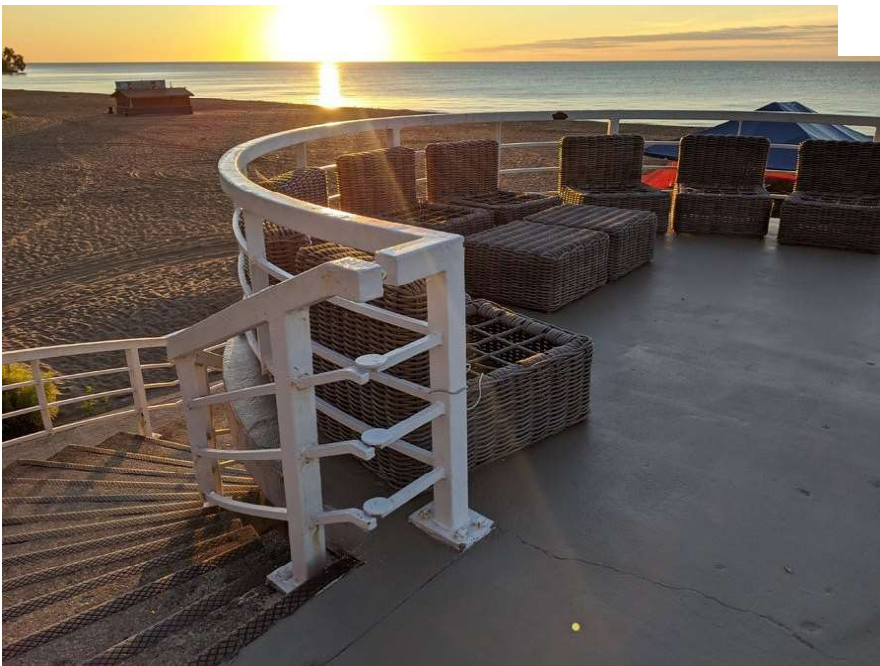


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The lessees said they have been planning this metallic makeover—reminiscent of efforts by former County Executive Chris Abele to privatize public parks—in consultation with parks officials since being granted their lease about 18 months ago. On May 26, Milwaukee County applied to the City of Milwaukee for a sign permit for “The Dock,” to be attached to the pavilion; that application is still pending.

County Supervisor Blindsided

Milwaukee County Supervisor Sheldon Wasserman, whose district includes Bradford Beach and who chairs the board’s Parks, Energy and Environment Committee, said he was blindsided about pavilion plans. He learned of them in late July after seeing [news coverage](#) about imminent renovations. Wasserman said in an August 4th interview that he was “surprised” that parks department officials had not informed him about the project, especially since he meets regularly with them as Parks Committee chair.

A Facebook page for “The Dock at Bradford” says the “waterfront bar and grill” would resemble The Dock at Montrose Beach in Chicago. “The objective of The Dock’s rooftop renovations is to provide Bradford Beach an elevated, both literally and figuratively, restaurant and gathering space with unparalleled lakefront views, providing the City of Milwaukee a getaway destination right in its own backyard,” said an executive summary by Dock Bradford. “The Dock rooftop also stands as a rentable lakeside space for private events, perfect for bachelor/bachelorette parties, corporate events and other functions,” said a June 25 media release from The Dock.

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By midsummer, numerous “Coming Soon” banners with renovation renderings hung from the local landmark’s railings. However, fast-moving plans hit a speed bump when the vendor learned that changes to the sleek Moderne-style bath house, located within the City of Milwaukee’s North Point North Historic District as a “contributing structure,” are subject to oversight by the city’s Historic Preservation Commission. Don Hanlon, Professor Emeritus of UWM’s School of Architecture and Urban Planning, has called the pavilion “one of the best buildings in town.”





PHOTO BY VIRGINIA SMALL

The HPC reviewed the [proposal](#) August 3. Five people opposed the proposal in writing, and no residents supported it. Ald. Nik Kovac also opposed it, saying he had not heard from anyone who favored the project. The virtual hearing included remarks by Dock officials, their attorney Brian Randall of Milwaukee, and Sarah Toomsen, Milwaukee County Parks' manager of planning and development. Nicholas Hynes, co-owner of The Doc, said they wanted to add “finer dining to make it more welcoming to bring families to the beach.” He said that a bar on the upper level was needed “to make the project feasible.”

Menu items would include tuna tartare for \$13, burgers for \$12 to \$14, and crispy pork belly for \$22. Bar options would include specialty cocktails, wines and craft beers, as do other bars at Bradford. HPC commissioner Sally Peltz questioned whether over-served Bradford Beach needs a fifth bar.

Bar Structure Receives City Approval

The HPC recommended approval of one “semi-permanent” shipping container for a bar and nixed a proposed 60-foot-long wall of “cozy cabana lounges housed in three dynamic 20-foot metal shipping

containers.” Owners of the Dock told HPC members that they had already bought and reconfigured the containers.

Milwaukee's Historic Preservation Office has since issued a Certificate of Appropriateness for the bar structure, with specifications to reduce its visual obtrusiveness. The vendor already has added varied types of seating and four umbrellas on the upper level, which the HPC allowed. The Dock has also placed temporary signs requiring anyone wanting to access the open rooftop to be seated by staff.

Tim Askin, a senior historic preservation planner for the City of Milwaukee, said that a DNS official had voiced “rather strong accessibility concerns” regarding Americans with Disabilities (ADA) accommodations. As is, the pavilion has been “grandfathered in” regarding ADA regulations. Any new construction ends that status.



Jeff Bentoff, a nearby neighbor, wrote an email to HPC about weight impacts on the historic structure: “Such containers weigh 2.6 tons empty...HPC needs to ensure that this historic structure can handle this very significant amount of added weight, in addition to the

weight of equipment and people. Ironically, Milwaukee County has closed two historic pedestrian bridges in the area, including one that provides access to the Bradford Beach Pavilion itself from Wahl Avenue over Lincoln Memorial Drive, because of alleged concerns that people walking on the bridges could harm those structures.” The latter bridge was since reopened but reportedly still needs repairs.

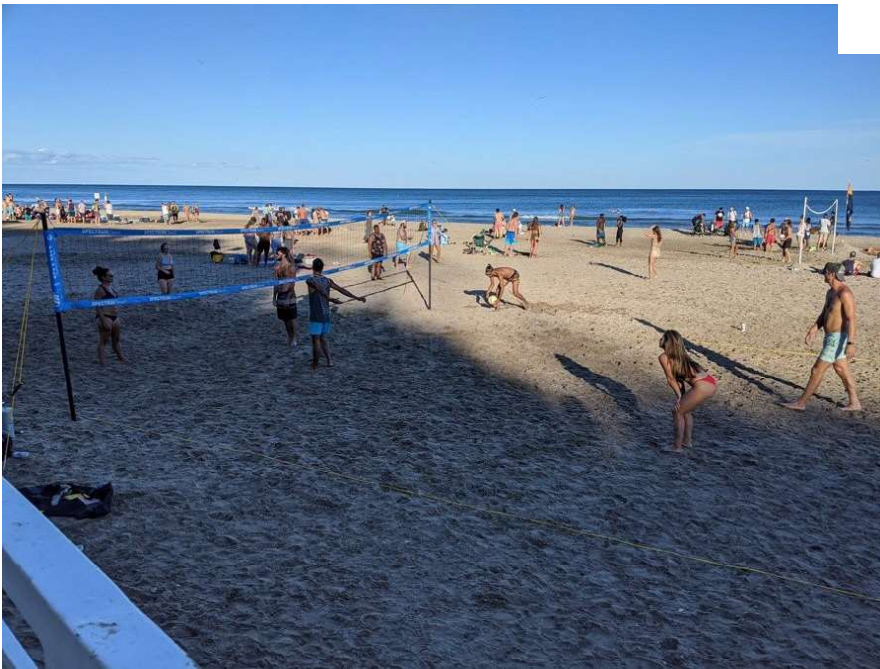


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No Public Process Conducted by County Officials

Milwaukee resident Jeff Loss wrote to the HPC: “We do not need another “semi-permanent” structure scarring our beautiful lakefront. Also, I do not recall any public input into the decision-making that went into this either. Hopefully the County will reverse course and not ‘sell-out’ piece by piece any more of Milwaukee’s jewels.”

Bentoff asked by phone, “Where is the public process

regarding this issue on the part of Milwaukee County during 18 months of behind-the-scenes planning?” Bentoff, a communications professional and former city and county official, said, “Even though it’s inexcusably late in the process, the Parks Department and Sup. Wasserman should now get input from — and listen to — the general public and groups invested in the lakefront and neighborhood.” HPC’s review of the proposal was strictly limited to historic-preservation issues. Bentoff said he welcomes seating on the upper deck, but does not want access to the public space to become “exclusive” and controlled by a private vendor, nor defaced with large shipping containers installed on the top. “The proposed changes would destroy the architectural beauty of this landmark and end the free, unrestricted access to the upper deck that the public has always enjoyed and deserved.”

[Arijit Sen](#), associate professor of architecture at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, also is concerned about restricting circulation patterns throughout and beyond the pavilion. Sen directs UWM’s Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures (BLC) Field School, which studied the “complex landscape” of Bradford Beach and its visitors while researching the Historic Water Tower neighborhood.



BLC's collaborative report about the Bradford pavilion, [posted on its website](#), describes three intersecting “social areas” throughout both levels of the pavilion, its three curving staircases, and beyond its edges.

Sen described the pavilion as a “free-flowing pass-through” for beachgoers and passers-by: “The pavilion connects to the bridge, the beach and sidewalk bordering Lincoln Memorial Drive.” Sen also said he was “troubled by the lack of any public process about major changes to what has become a very diverse urban destination. At Bradford Beach, including within this pavilion, you see young and old people, Black and white people, throughout the day.” Sen said that in recent years Bradford Beach became a racially integrated space within a mostly segregated Milwaukee. “This happened, in part, after the county closed nearly all the swimming pools that previously served Milwaukee’s predominantly African American neighborhoods. The lakefront became the only place for many people to cool off in summer and enjoy water-based recreation.”

Completed around 1950, the pavilion also part of a Milwaukee County Historic District, called “Lake Michigan Parkway North,” which has been deemed

eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The district encompasses Lincoln Memorial Drive, designed as a scenic parkway, and its adjacent parks. It is unclear whether, how and by whom the project might be *publicly* reviewed for compliance with preservation protocols detailed in the *Milwaukee County Parks and Parkways Historic Properties Management Plan*. That taxpayer-funded *inventory and guide*, developed in 2012-13 as mitigation for the demolition of several historic bridges, was created to inform appropriate stewardship of the park system's historic assets and avert further demolition of irreplaceable resources.

Toomsen said by email on September 14th, "At this time a review is underway for the proposed container bar at the Bradford Beach Bath House. The County review team includes representatives from Parks Planning, Parks Trades, and the County's Architecture & Engineering Division. The City's Historic Preservation Commission's action referred to an ADA review of the project by the Department of Neighborhood Services (DNS), and the County's review team will consider accessibility as well...When the County review is complete our approval and any conditions will be noted in a right-of-entry permit. No such permit has yet been issued for construction."



Wasserman said on September 15 in an email: “After Parks staff has had the time to take an in-depth look at this, then we can look at holding a meeting. If Parks staff indicate they believe the project should move forward, then I would be able to request an informational report to come before the Board. The public would then be able to comment on the item.”

Although the Parks Department may choose to continue planning a major repurposing of this public space without engaging the public or the county board, it remains within the board’s purview to request updates on pending projects. When an agenda item is heard in committee, residents may publicly comment on it. Civic discussion about the potential fate of this ship-like structure—and its role in public health--need not wait until after that ship sails.

Guy Smith, executive director of Milwaukee County Parks, said in an email that “this proposal will be an agenda item” for the Lakefront Development Advisory Committee. LDAC is charged with reviewing development proposed for Milwaukee’s Lakefront and making *non-binding* recommendations.

Examining Issues of Transparency, Equity and Access

The County's original contract with the Dock Bradford states that "The Premises shall remain open and available to the public during regular hours the Park remains open."

Leaving the public in the dark about drastic plans for parks (until releasing bombshell announcements) became Chris Abele's modus operandi during his nine-year tenure as county executive, which ended last April. That included unpopular, eventually averted schemes such as putting parking meters in parks, selling off O'Donnell Park on the lakefront, and evicting the highly successful Milwaukee County Winter Market from the Mitchell Park Domes. Abele also quietly issued a [now-moot edict to parks officials](#) that fees and concessions must entirely fund the department's operating budget. No other park system in a major U.S. municipality has established such a regressive goal, according to Peter Harnik, a national expert on urban parks.

County Parks officials did not respond to repeated queries about revenue projections at Bradford. Thus, it is unclear, what, if any, increase in revenue for Milwaukee County might result from a rooftop bar and pricey restaurant.



Sen said that focus on monetizing civic spaces can result in excluding people from places that are clearly owned by the public, which by law belong to everyone. “It becomes evident to some people that ‘You don’t belong here’ unless you can afford to pay to play.” He said that is why “representative democracy, a process that takes time and commitment, is so essential to responsible stewardship of public spaces.”

Now it is up to County Executive David Crowley and his administration to determine the fate of Bradford Beach’s pavilion. Will it remain a democratizing public mecca for everyone—or get subdivided for haves and have-nots, with velvet ropes cordoning off the best views for the few?

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