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Long Beach access a pain in the grass

Town presents a plan it hopes will abate private-public antagonism

By Paul Gauvin

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The town has presented a Long Beach access plan to members of the Centerville Civic Association that is apt to please the many but perhaps not the few.

Hoping to settle a grassy disagreement between a public majority represented by the Centerville Civic Association and a minority of private homeowners on Long Beach Road represented by the Long Beach Association, Inc. the town unveiled plans to widen two access lanes situated between private waterfront homes.

Officials hope to make the roads more evident and welcoming.

As revealed at last week's annual meeting of the civic association, the town would place bicycle racks, assure public beach space, add snow fencing and a gravel path and install floats at two parking lots across the road from the beach paths for access to the Centerville River by people using portable craft such as kayaks, canoes and light inflatables.

The access issue has a decades-long history in which abutters of two originally 40-foot wide public roads from Long Beach Road to the beach have incrementally encroached on the town property with lawn and sprinklers, obliterating a defined public path to the beach.

The owners' association also planted beach grass at

the foot of the public way to restore and maintain the dunes there, which critics saw as an attempt to impede public access to the beach.

Peter Fisher, civic association president, said the encroachment was such that it made people uncomfortable thinking they were crossing private lawns to get to the shore.

He said the problem grew when actions, including placing 'keep off the grass' signs and parking their cars in public lots, were taken by the homeowners to hamper access and harass beachgoers.

"At one point somebody put chains at the entrance to the parking lots," he said. "and the town had to come and take them down."

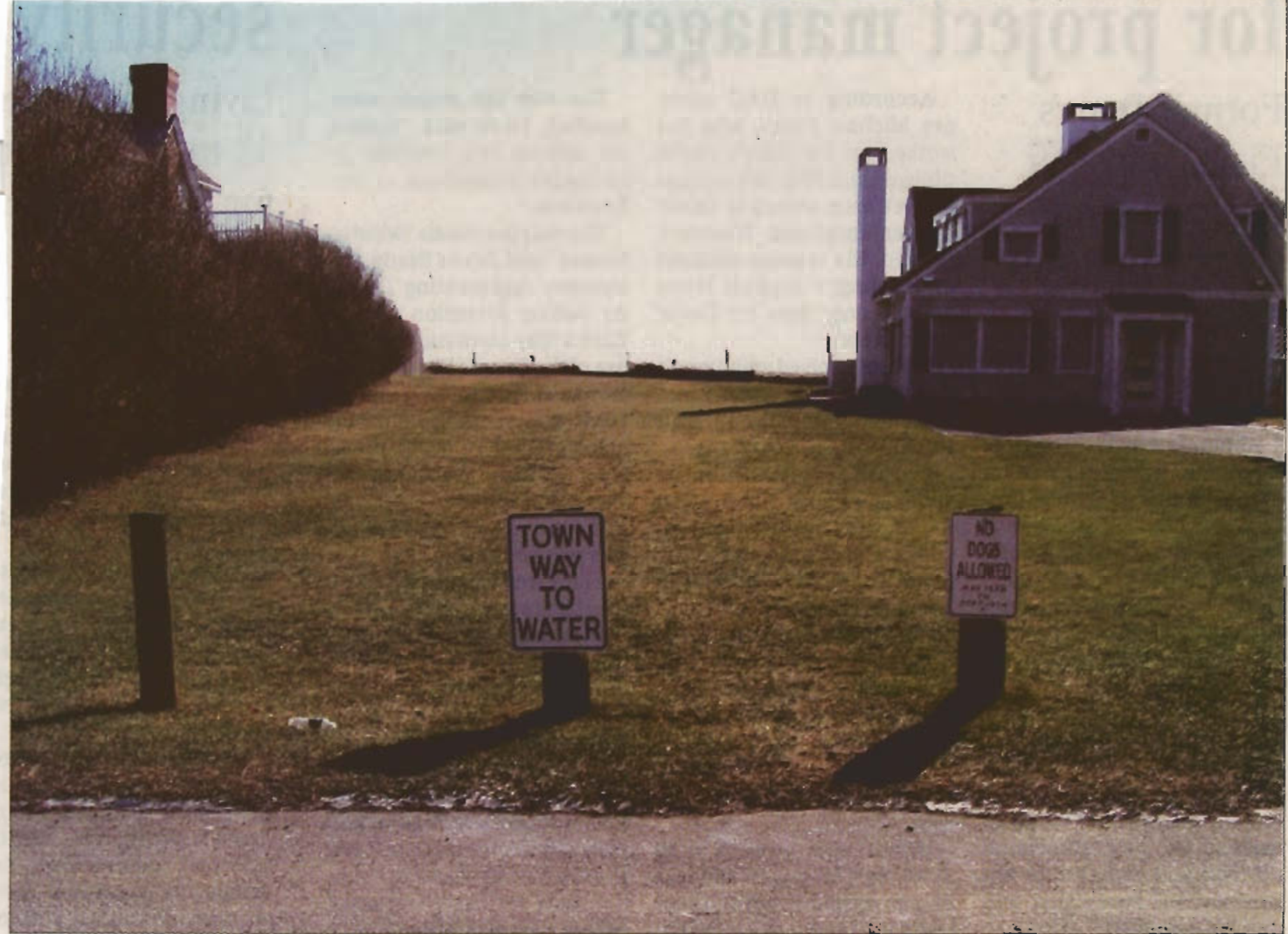
At this week's meeting of the civic association's board of directors, the town's plans were supported as a good first step, with some hope expressed for greater action and access in the future.

In 1999, the Conservation Commission ordered the town to remove some of the beach grass planted, as well as return the beach grass to its previous line.

Last year, claiming that foot traffic was eroding the beach at the head of the access paths, the homeowners' group lobbied the town to build a boardwalk to define the access path over the beach grass and to replenish beach grass pulled out by beachgoers.

The owners asserted, in correspondence earlier this month with Town Hall, that the beach grass they had planted at their considerable expense "is being torn out (by beachgoers) in order to gain more usable beach."

The owners' boardwalk plan attracted criticism among beach users to the point that, said Town



PAUL GAUVIN PHOTOS

WHAT WAY? – The sign says it's the public way to water, but it looks like somebody's private lawn. Actually, there is supposed to be a definable 40-foot road there. A new town plan would define a walkway.

Councilor Janet Joakim, it generated many phone calls to her. "The town had to respond," she said.

The issue with the beach grass is that it is protected. People are not supposed to walk on it. Thus, placing it at the head of the public way was seen by some as an impediment to access, while the homeowners' group viewed the action as beach replenishment and protection.

The new access plan was developed by Lindsey Counsell and the staff in the Growth Management Department, with input from Town Manager John Klimm, who, said Assistant Town

Manager Paul Niedzwiecki, suggested placement of bicycle stands at the access entrances.

The town plan met with general consent of the audience after some aggressive debate between Councilors Joakim and Tom Rugo, Fisher and Jack Driscoll, a Long Beach homeowner representing the homeowners' association for its president, Dom Gautrau, who was out of town.

Driscoll pressed for replanting the beach grass his group claims has been yanked by beachgoers.

However, "That's not going to happen," Niedzwiecki said.

He also said no parking spaces would be removed or added to accommodate the floats for boaters.

Counsell explained that the access path would be wide enough to have small trucks replenish sand, rather than eat up blanket space, with beach grass, and that snow fencing would help maintain the topography.

Joakim suggested that a return to a 40- or 50-foot-wide public access lane might allow for more parking.

Rugo downplayed that idea in an apparent move to appease the homeowners. He suggested that the town is not looking to increase

traffic over those paths.

The new access plan has to go through the regulatory Conservation Commission hurdles and find a source of funding, said Ruth Weil, director of the Growth Management Department, noting these would be pursued as quickly as possible to get the access routes installed.

The growth department was also scheduled earlier to present and update of the village vision plan, but the town was not ready to do so.

Niedzwiecki did say zoning proposals for Cragville Beach area would be forthcoming.