

Beach Access Must Be Equal For All

The busiest beach weekend of the year has arrived and I continue to field complaints from constituents asking why the City of Holmes Beach is discriminating against county taxpayers who can't afford to live on Anna Maria Island.

Shortly after receiving millions in county funds to nourish beaches and at the outset of the coronavirus pandemic, Holmes Beach city officials took away over 1,000 beach parking spaces by restricting on-street parking for island visitors. Government should not rule over our day-to-day lives, but maintaining access to a public asset is one of the few responsibilities which they should dutifully execute. The city of Holmes Beach neglects this duty, as city officials withhold over 1,000 public beach parking spaces and restrict on-street parking for visitors under the auspice of safety. It has been over a year since they made that disastrous decision and the excuses are still piling up for why they will not restore those public parking spaces. It's unacceptable that Holmes Beach officials used a tragic pandemic as an opportunity to cut off public beach access to thousands of Manatee County residents and visitors. Their actions are shameful and must be reversed immediately. The lack of parking has also exacerbated island traffic jams as families circle the streets looking for a parking space.

This attempt to isolate our beaches from those of us who cannot afford a home on Anna Maria Island must end. This exclusionary policy of limiting beach access to wealthy residents and tourists is dividing us and is not an accurate representation of the values of our community. Our beaches have always been public and must be accessible to all residents regardless of their income level. If you live near our public beach, visitors will always be a part of your life.

That was known to everyone who lives near the beach when they purchased their property.

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After meeting with Holmes Beach officials, the battle to restore beach parking still has not been resolved. I have offered the city an ample amount of county resources and bent over backward to address some of their concerns about the influx of people coming to our beaches via their community. However, the Mayor remains unwilling to compromise. I promise you I am not giving up the fight to make sure everyone has equal access to visit our beautiful beaches.

Manatee County beaches belong to the citizens of Manatee County and it's my job as your County Commissioner to ensure they're easily accessible to you and your family. Our beaches are the crown jewel of Manatee County and public access to them must be a priority. The public has a right to have access to the land it pays to preserve. This is a destination city and unfortunately, the word is out that Anna Maria Island is paradise.

Manatee County government spends millions of dollars annually maintaining the beaches on Anna Maria Island. We are reaching the point where we must ask ourselves, should every county taxpayer continue to pay taxes to maintain beaches that are becoming accessible to only a privileged few?

Lastly, as tourism continues to grow and our population increases, it's imperative for residents and visitors to treat our beach communities as if you live there. When you're visiting our beaches please don't forget to properly dispose of your trash, don't park your vehicle on someone's lawn and be respectful of island residents and their neighborhoods. It's critical for the entire community to come together and continue to respect the environment that we have all worked so

hard to maintain.

Holmes Beach Elected Officials contact information can be found at holmesbeachfl.org.

To contact Holmes Beach Mayor Judy Titsworth by email: hbmayor@holmesbeachfl.org

To contact Commissioner Van Ostenbridge by email: kevin.vanostenbridge@mymanatee.org

To schedule appointments, follow through on concerns, or obtain County information, you may contact Commissioner Van Ostenbridge's assistant Celeste McDuffie by phone at (941) 745-3708 or email at celeste.mcduffie@mymanatee.org.