Grant could pay for further Solanus Beach planning

PETOSKEY — Petoskey officials might seek state dollars to help finance further studies into the future of Solanus Mission Beach.

The city's parks and recreation department has been in the early phases of planning out improvements for the site, which lies roughly 2,000 feet west of Bayfront Park Main and the Petoskey Municipal Marina. The main objectives for the project relate to accessibility and environmental quality. Petoskey City Council members will discuss a grant opportunity at their meeting this week, which will take place at 7 p.m. Monday at Petoskey City Hall.

The grant on the table is called The Coastal Healthy Habitat, Waters and Communities grant, and is financed through the Michigan Coastal Management Program. According to information included in city agenda materials, the program focuses on “protecting coastal native vegetation, wildlife, water quality, erosion control while improving connections to the coast for public use and enjoyment.” The city is looking for $10,000 from the Coastal Management Program, which would be matched with $10,000 out of the city's coffers.

Any grant money the city receives through the program would only go toward preplanning for now. The city plans to use it for feasibility studies and community engagement purposes. For example, parts of the planning process will survey for endangered plants and animals that could be impacted by a possible development. Others will gauge feedback regarding how much residents would...
be likely to use public access to the shoreline.

"It’s essentially to help fund a feasibility study, because the shoreline is so sensitive we don’t want to spend dollars on coastal projects that aren’t feasible," parks and recreation director Kendall Klingelsmith said in an interview with the News-Review.

Any possible development hinges on the results of those studies, but, if the city gets the feasibility study grant and the studies prove promising, it could open the door to additional grants in the future that would actually fund the implementation phase of the project.

The parks and recreation commission adopted a resolution in support of the project at its May meeting.

Parts of the planning process will potentially be managed by partners, including Beckett and Raeder, Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians, Top of Michigan Trails Council, Petoskey Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Disability Network of Northern Michigan.

Current conceptual plans include accessibility ramps, a boardwalk and decking along the shore, a modest shelter with restrooms and a drinking fountain, benches and bike racks — although Klingelsmith reiterated that no elements of that plan are close to moving forward until the feasibility studies occur.

According to past News-Review stories, the idea for such improvements grew out of a cleanup effort that occurred last year in response to the slight neglect, overgrowth and invasive plants issues that had impacted Solanus Mission Beach. The Solanus park area is the site of the historic St. Francis Solanus Indian Mission Church building.

Initial plans for the improvement project, which were released at the start of this year, were initially on a larger scale. The plans offered ideas for both Solanus Mission Beach and the connected Bayfront Park West, including sand volleyball courts, a play structure, picnic shelters and a hammock circle. But most of those proved unpopular among some neighboring residents, who said they valued the quiet, undeveloped nature of the park as it now sits.

In past interviews, Klingelsmith said those plans were purely hypothetical, and city officials quickly returned to the drawing board to come up with the scaled-back concept.

But, any tangible development is still a long way off. Assuming all goes perfectly, Klingelsmith said the city will probably not even be ready to apply for an implementation grant until 2021, at the earliest. Then, design and engineering work could start.

"We’re unique in that don’t have a lot of public access to the shorelines — for a lot of really good reasons," he said. "But, this is a project that could highlight that opportunity."