

200 turn out to weigh in on Sandy Point

Crowd is told forum not meant to be like public hearing: 'We're neither asking permission or your approval to do this'

By **JOE WOJTAS**
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Stonington — At the beginning of Wednesday night's public forum on closing off sections of Sandy Point to protect nesting shorebirds, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service official Richard Potvin got right to the point.

He said he had been hearing that some people were worried that the island's change in management from the Stonington Community Center to his agency will mean people will no longer be able to use the popular recreational destination.

He said that was not true.

"We want people using Sandy Point for many years. We want them to come out to learn about the wildlife and appreciate the wildlife," he said, as many of the 200 people who packed the community center auditorium applauded.

The Avalonia Land Conservancy,

which owns the narrow, mile-long island in Little Narragansett Bay and operates it as a nature preserve, has signed a five-year management agreement with the fish and wildlife service. Potvin has estimated that about half the island above the mean high-water mark will be closed off

to visitors from April to September to protect the nests of endangered and threatened birds such as piping plovers, American oystercatchers and least terns, among others. The community center will continue to

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sell seasonal and day passes to the island.

One woman in the audience complained Wednesday that after Potvin's presentation, residents were given the chance to attend four separate sessions in different parts of the community center to offer input on issues such as access and conservation law.

She said the forum should be run more like a public hearing so everyone could listen to the public input. With some in the audience angry about the management change, the meeting could have quickly become contentious.

But Avalonia President Anne Roberts-Pierson reminded the woman that Wednesday's forum was not a municipal meeting where a board would later render a decision after listening to residents.

"We're neither asking permission or your approval to do this," she said.

Potvin, who is the manager of the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge, explained that any time the federal government takes an action that can affect the environment it must perform an assessment. He said the many comments the agency received Wednesday night will be taken into account as it prepares a detailed assessment about how to manage Sandy Point.

"You guys have been coming out to the island for many, many years, so you have the knowledge we can glean from," he said.

Potvin said the island will be managed as part of the McKinney wildlife refuge and said all current rules will be enforced, such as a ban on dogs, overnight camping, discarding cooking charcoal, entering closed nesting areas and discarding of trash. He showed photos of violations from last year and said educational signs will be put up.

At one of the sessions after

Potvin's presentation, fish and wildlife enforcement officer Sean Healy stressed that fish and wildlife officers and staff will be primarily on the island to educate users about the birds and their habitat.

"We're not going to go out there and start slapping handcuffs on people. That's not what we're there for," he said. "If it's something minor, we'll talk to people and point out what they're doing. We're not going out there to destroy everyone's fun."

Healy said the agency wants to balance the use of the island by both the public and the wildlife.

He asked boaters to tell him what areas they use on the island so they might be kept open. They did and pointed out that shallow water already prevents them from accessing some parts of the island. Healy said the closed areas could change depending on where biologists determine the birds are nesting.

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