

Red flag at Britannia Beach

– and how to prevent another death in 2025

Ottawa, Canada / October 2024



Contents

Key messages / summary 3
To the beach! It's May and it's hot! 6
Packed beach on Victoria Day (20 May 2024) 6
Boy dies 12 days later (3 June 2024) 7
Long history of drownings at Britannia 8
The dangers of the invisible underwater drop-off 8
Having lifeguard supervision is essential 9
The City's recruitment and budgeting of lifeguards 10
Education is only one part of the solution 12
A safety audit for Britannia, finally 12
Extend the lifeguarding season and hours 13
Beach water is often polluted 13
Jet skis do whatever they want 14
References 15

By Paul Csagoly, a resident near Britannia Beach, Ottawa
Earthly Communications / Ottawa, Canada / 2024
earthlycommunications@gmail.com

Key messages / summary

To the beach!

Ottawa can have long and bitterly cold winters. When spring is finally in the air, residents love to get outside. Many flock to Britannia Beach in the city's west end, already in May. On 20 May 2024, Victoria Day, it was very hot (29.5C) and, as expected, hundreds of people were at the beach. Climate change brings the heat earlier and earlier, so future springtime in Ottawa will continue to be hot. Many beach-goers also happen to be new immigrants to Canada, many of which live near the beach, many of which have poor swimming skills or awareness.



Many recent drownings

Over the last few years, multiple fatal and non-fatal drownings have occurred at or near Britannia Beach. The latest preventable death was that of a 9-year-old boy on 3 June 2024. A particularly concerning issue is the “drop-off” at the beach, most likely caused by the City's dredging operations in 2020. Meant to improve the beach, dredging resulted in a drop-off, which is very sudden, deep and possibly shifting with time. It's also invisible to swimmers, hidden in a beach area which appears to be safe, given all the happy people swimming about (although the City started posting signs about the drop-off's dangers).

Multiple safety risks

The beach covers a large area where hundreds of people with different sizes, ages, backgrounds and swimming skills converge to have fun. As noted above, many people don't know how to swim and there's that very dangerous drop-off somewhere. There are also multiple additional risks.

Across Ontario, according to the 2024 Ontario Drowning Report, 68% of drownings occurred from May to September. Less than 1% of drownings happen in a lifeguard-supervised setting. For children under the age of 5, 97% of drownings were because supervision was absent or distracted. For all drownings, 48% occurred in a lake or pond and 19% in a river.

Looking through the lens of this report, Britannia Beach has highly elevated safety risks. For one, for the five months between May and September in 2024, the City provided lifeguard supervision at the beach for less than half of this period, from June 15 to August 25, and only until 7:00 p.m., leaving out May, half of June, part of August, all of September, and some time before sunset every summer day. Two, there are many children at the beach. Three, Britannia Beach lies next to a river and lake. Unsupervised open settings appear to be the most worrisome.

In 2023, three recent deaths at Britannia prompted Ontario's Coroner Office to investigate. Their report concluded that all three deaths were new arrivals to Canada, all were novice swimmers, all were near the drop-off, and all died soon after lifeguards went home for the day.

The City's poor safety record

When I visited the beach on Victoria Day, 20 May 2024, I didn't see much in place related to safety measures. There was a sign explaining the City's flag system, whereby a green flag means swimming is advised and lifeguards are on duty, and a red flag means there is a "no-swimming advisory", either because there is no lifeguard and/or water quality is poor (one cannot tell which is the actual problem). But there was no flag at all. And there was no flagpole!

The City had its last beach safety audit in 2010, 14 years ago. This was despite Lifesaving Society Ontario having recently offered to do an audit and recommending such audits be done every five years, and the Coroner's Office recommending in 2023 that a safety audit be conducted before the start of every swimming season each year. It wasn't until the Coroner's Office again recommended the safety audit – after the boy's death in 2024 – that the City agreed to one, near the end of the 2024 season.

The City appears to believe having adequate lifeguarding is important. In early 2024, according to Councillor Sean Devine, the City admitted that there was a large gap in the provision of lifeguarding services. Speaking to reporters in August 2024, Councillor Brockington said, "We know people are there [at the beach], so why do we not have staffing that matches that need?" Nonetheless, three main barriers appear to dilute the City's ability to provide adequate lifeguarding.

One, the City says that paying for lifeguards is costly, and it's difficult to find the resources through the City's tight budget. However, in 2016, the City was able to extend the schedule by one week, which has carried on to this day. Somehow, Toronto, Gatineau and the National Capital Commission manage to pay for lifeguards on their beaches earlier in June. Last year, Toronto's lifeguards were out from the first weekend in June until September 22! Following an inquiry by Councillor Devine, the City provided three options for extending lifeguarding services, each with a price tag. However, they all fall short of having lifeguards starting from Victoria Day weekend.

Why? And this is the second main barrier. Guarding lives at beaches in Ottawa revolves around the availability of high-school students who finish school at the end of June. And, for some reason, this lack of availability, according to the City, can't be made up by college and university students and other adults. But is this a rational argument not to have lifeguards when hundreds of people are at a beach anyway? Perhaps the City should change its recruitment approach, pay better salaries, and attract people with schedules that better match the needs of swimmers? On a positive note, the City's general manager responsible for beaches did note that job offers and employment terms could include earlier start and end dates. Finally, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), the costs of not preventing drownings must also be considered – in Canada, the total annual cost of drowning injury is US\$ 173 million!

Three, there appears to be too much focus on education as *the* solution. Without question, there are many people, including children, that need to learn how to swim, and education could be better provided at pools and schools and to those with low incomes. Councillor Theresa Kavanagh also had a suggestion that people be tested before they enter the water at Britannia, but I don't see how that could be operationalized in practice. In the end, education is one answer, but not the only one.

Lifeguard supervision is essential

It seems clear from the experts and the evidence that having lifeguards supervise an open setting such as Britannia Beach should be the priority, and that the lifeguarding season should start in May and last until at least Labour Day weekend, after which schools start up again. The statistic that less than 1% of drownings happen in a lifeguard-supervised setting in Ontario is particularly convincing and compelling. As

is the 2023 Coroner's Office report – all three deaths it investigated were new arrivals to Canada, novice swimmers, near the drop-off, and died soon after lifeguards went home for the day.

Drownings are preventable. And public safety decision-makers need to strike the correct balance between what is expected of a city to prevent drownings and what is expected of an individual in terms of self-responsibility. Of course, people should seek, on their own accord, to learn how to swim better, understand the environment they are entering, and pay attention to signs and flags. But one can expect that personal sense of responsibility to have limitations in the real world, especially on a beautiful hot day when hundreds of people are having a wonderful time swimming in what appears to be a safe and shallow beach area. This is where essential lifeguarding is critical – it's not an "extra layer" of protection but rather the most important layer.

Act! Extend lifeguarding at Britannia Beach (e.g., through the City's 2025 budget)

It's clear that the beach is dangerous and, as a result, people are drowning. The status quo is not enough, and more people are at grave risk in the future, including in 2025.

The best and quickest solution is to extend lifeguarding services from at least Victoria Day weekend to Labour Day weekend, and beyond 7 p.m. each day.

This could be financed, for example, through the City's 2025 budget, to be finalized 11 December 2024.

The focus should be on needs and saving lives, not on the schedules of high-school students. The costs of not doing more are even greater. WHO has stated that governments should do more to prevent drownings.

Water quality testing at beaches also needs to be extended in a similar way. For one-eighth of the supervised swimming season in 2024, Britannia Beach was closed due to poor water quality. This could mean that many people were often swimming in polluted water before or after the season.

Finally, the **jet skis that fly around Britannia Beach are a serious hazard** and pose a grave threat to swimmers throughout the bay. There are laws and regulations in place to manage this. More needs to be done to enforce these laws, before this too leads to a serious accident or death.

July 25 is World Drowning Prevention Day. Let's celebrate the Day in 2025 by commending the City for having taken this important lifesaving step, which resulted in no drownings at Britannia Beach from Victoria Day weekend to July 25!

Britannia Beach and its park is **one of Ottawa's best assets**. The winter canal downtown is also super, but with climate change, it's becoming less available for skating. Let's make the best of our natural assets!

To the beach! It's May and it's hot!

Ottawa is one of the coldest capital cities on this planet. Winters are long and often freezing. When the over one million citizens of the city start believing winter is finally ending, excitement is in the air, and many want to head outdoors.

The northern border of Canada's capital city is the Ottawa River, the main artery to a massive watershed crossing the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. The river also represents the border between the two provinces. The river flows west to east, and the City of Ottawa manages four beaches on the river. The main one in the west end is Britannia Beach, a large sandy expanse that hugs shallow Britannia Bay. Just east of Britannia Bay is the Deschênes Rapids. Surrounding the beach are a huge grassy park area, picnic tables, benches, barbeque stands, community centre, tennis club, dog park, baseball and soccer fields, playgrounds, cycling and walking trails, restaurant and a peninsula that juts out into the bay with a pebbly beach at its end. It has one of the most beautiful sunsets I've ever seen (and I'm not the only one). So, it's no surprise that, when that long Ottawa winter is over and people are thirsty for some sun and fun, many head to Britannia.

That part of the city also just happens to be extremely multicultural and diverse. Just east of Britannia Beach is Britannia Village, an upscale charming neighbourhood with several historic homes and the private Britannia Beach Yacht Club. Just west is a lower-income area pronounced by public housing and new arrivals to Canada, many from developing countries. So, again, when that first spring heat hits Ottawa's west end, you'll find citizens of all types – a microcosm of the world – involved in literally hundreds of individual and group activities. On busy days, parking in the park is near impossible, so local streets receive the overflow.

As a result of climate change, hot temperatures are arriving earlier to Ottawa and its beaches. That drives many people to Britannia's fine sand beach and beach volleyball courts as early as April and May. On some afternoons, dozens of beach volleyball nets will be up with players serving, setting and spiking. And more than anything, people love the water – of all ages and different interests, from tiny toddlers having their first awesome wet walks along the edge, to sand-covered kids constructing sandy works of art, to youths playing ball in the water, to adults taking long-distance swims across the bay with orange floats tied to their waists. Water-lovers will also have a wide variety of swimming and safety skills, from highly advanced to can't swim at all. You'll also find canoers, kayakers, paddleboarders, windsurfers and kite surfers – Britannia is known for its frequent amazing winds.

What could be more fun than that after a long winter?

Packed beach on Victoria Day (20 May 2024)

On Monday 20 May 2024, Canadians were celebrating Victoria Day from coast to coast to coast (as Canadians always say). The Day is considered to be the first true post-winter national holiday by many. On May 20, the temperature reached a high of 29.5 C¹, which is very high for late May. And so, hundreds of citizens swarmed into the park, onto the beach and into the water. People were having a great time.

The beach is just down the road from where I live. I go there often, especially in warm weather. I love watching people having a great time. I strolled down on Victoria Day, amazed to see how many people were there, the car park completely full. But one activity really annoyed me, as it always does. The jet skis.

As usual, I saw one shooting into the bay from the wider river at full speed. Later, another was full-throttling from side to side, smashing into its own waves, providing a free show. A small congregation of them was parked near the beach, playing loud music. I've never understood why they are allowed to do what they do in such a highly populated area, even though they pose such a high risk to swimmers and others in the water.

I would have asked a lifeguard if anything was being done about them. But that wasn't possible. There were no lifeguards. The City only sends lifeguards to its beaches, and tests the water quality, starting June 15 until August 25, well after the warm weather has set in. There is a sign near the beach which informs citizens that the City has a flag system in place. A green flag means swimming is advised and lifeguards are on duty. A red flag means there is a "no swimming advisory", but one can't decipher whether that's because the water is not clean and/or is unsupervised. But besides there being no lifeguards that day, there was also no flagpole and no flag! In other words, despite the fact there were hundreds of people on the sunny beach and in the water, and jet skis were flying around at full speed, there didn't appear to be any public safety measures in place, except for some signs.

Toronto's 5-flag system for beaches

Green means good conditions. Yellow means moderate. Red means high hazards. No flag means no lifeguards are on duty. And two red over yellow flag means a designated swimming area in-between closely supervised by lifeguards.

Source: <https://www.toronto.ca/explore-enjoy/parks-recreation/places-spaces/beaches-gardens-attractions/beaches/beach-safety/>

I'd been annoyed many times before about this lack of public safety. Two days later, on 22 May, I decided to send an email to the office of my local Bay Ward city councillor, Theresa Kavanagh, whose ward includes Britannia, and expressed three concerns about public safety. One, that the City should have lifeguards there *when* there are many people at the open public beach (like on a very hot national holiday). Two, the City should test water quality at the beach and inform beachgoers (otherwise, they don't know if they are swimming in polluted water). And three, beware the jet skis. At the end, I said that, without addressing these concerns, someone would soon be eventually injured or killed.

Boy dies 12 days later (3 June 2024)

Monday afternoon, June 3, was a P.D. day, meaning a professional development day for public school workers, meaning kids didn't go to school that day. It was a beautiful sunny day, and I had just finished doing my usual cycling route along the trail next to the river. I stopped near Britannia Beach and found a part of the beach had been cordoned off with tape extended between three City police cars and the lifeguard chair. The designated swim area was empty of swimmers. Concerned police walked around. At home I checked CBC News² and found that a child had been rescued from the water and given CPR by bystanders, after which firefighters had come and taken over, after which paramedics had arrived and taken the child to the hospital. The next day, CBC News³ reported the child as being a nine-year-old boy, and that he had died. It wasn't June 15 yet, so there had been no lifeguards on duty.

After hearing the news, I sent a follow-up message to my City councillor. Nobody had replied to my first email 12 days before. On June 4, I decided to call the City's general line and ask more questions. I managed to speak with a "client service representative", to whom I asked a number of questions, including requests for documents. She said she had written down my questions and would send them through appropriate channels. She added that the "service level agreement" deadline for the City to respond to my inquiry was three days: June 7. June 7 came and went, and more days, weeks and months passed.

I have an office on the second floor of my house. My window faces north towards the beach. Until June 15, every day and every few minutes, depending on the weather, I could hear, over a loudspeaker at the beach, a young City staff person announcing to park-goers that the beach was not supervised.

On June 12, I decided to dive in for more information.

Long history of drownings at Britannia

I found that, on 28 May 2024, CBC News reported a man died after being rescued near Britannia Beach. The news⁴ said that Ottawa Fire Services (OFS) first received a call from a citizen saying a person was stuck under the water in the Deschênes Rapids. OFS said, “Upon arrival, there was somebody submerged in the water, halfway from shore to a capsized boat that was from a rescue last week in the same area,” adding that they were wearing a life jacket. “The person was entangled in the rope that was used to tie the boat off to the shore.” The report added that the individual was unresponsive, and firefighters began CPR and continued to provide CPR on route to the hospital. The strange thing to me was the boat had capsized the week before (its two passengers had managed to get to shore safely). But the boat remained “lodged” there, according to OFS, and they would only remove it once water levels went down.

I then found a CityNews 11 June 2024 report⁵ noting that Nick DeFazio, media relations officer with OFS, told CityNews that crews had already done eight rescues from Deschênes Rapids in the Ottawa River in 2024. It added that people launch from Britannia Beach and paddle past the point and, before they know it, are sucked into the fast-moving Ottawa River. DeFazio added that, the week before, two paddleboarders were caught in the rapids and had to be rescued because they were too exhausted after fighting the current.

Citing an earlier CBC News story⁶, in July 2023, police were called about people in distress in the beach water just after 7 p.m. Sunday. Police called firefighters for help and, when firefighters arrived, lifeguards and civilians were searching for a swimmer who had been underwater for about nine minutes. “Someone found the missing swimmer underwater,” noted the report, after which a firefighter pulled them out and gave CPR to one of them. Paramedics then came and took the person to hospital: a 17-year-old girl who ended up being in critical condition.

The dangers of the invisible underwater drop-off

In 2020, the City closed Britannia Beach for the summer for dredging. Back then, I never understood why. I can't remember speaking to any neighbours who said they understood why either. My web search led to a CBC News story⁷ in July 2020 noting the City as saying the work was necessary because silt and sand carried by the river's current, waves and unprecedented spring flooding had gradually filled in the swimming area. Since the last dredging in 1990, the water depth had shrunk to less than half a metre. The new dredging work would provide “a more consistent slope and better water depth within the swimming area”. However, even though the beach was officially off limits with no lifeguard on duty, people still flocked there and swam, despite warning signs. That led to tragedy when a 20-year-old swimmer died after going into the water Saturday night, 5 July 2020, and failed to resurface. His body was found the next morning. On July 5, CBC News⁸ added that, even though the beach wasn't technically open, it was still packed with people that Sunday — some who had heard about the incident the night before, and some who hadn't.

I found a Reddit community discussion web page entitled “Near drowning today at Britannia Beach due dangerous dredging issues” from 2021⁹. One of the citizens posted that he/she was worried that the dredging work had created a deep crater in an area that was otherwise knee deep and by all appearances seemed safe. The person added, “Most people were fully dressed and just cooling off. There were no ropes, and no signage of any sort other than covid restrictions. If you doubt what I’m saying, please go there yourself. See how you feel walking in knee-deep water and then suddenly plunging in. I’m 5’6” and I couldn’t touch the bottom. All 3 adults who helped were all struggling as none of us could get our footing.”

During the summer of 2023, three years after the dredging took place, Constable Caroline Gallant, who works with the Ottawa police marine, dive and trails unit, told CBC News¹⁰ that the river floor at Britannia Beach was unpredictable and can be hazardous to swimmers who are unfamiliar with it or not particularly strong in the water. “You could be walking along and you’re in maybe three or four feet of water, and all of a sudden it dips down and you could be in 15 feet of water,” she said. “So, if you’re not expecting that, it can be pretty shocking.” “We’ve seen a lot of water rescues. We work with our firefighter and paramedic partners to respond to any water rescues,” she said.

In the summer of 2023, my wife was down at the beach one day and personally witnessed a male bystander having to dive into the water to save a young girl who had fallen into the drop-off. “It was terrible to watch,” she said.

Fast forward again to summer of 2024, the shoreline had multiple signs along the beach reading “sudden drop off” as a warning to swimmers. There were also some white buoys in the water acting as hazard signs. But the truth is that the water is not clear enough to be able to see where a drop-off starts or ends. So, it’s not very realistic to expect people to know what to do or act safely. That’s why lifeguards are needed.



Having lifeguard supervision is essential

According to the 2024 Ontario Drowning Report, prepared for the Lifesaving Society Ontario by the Drowning Prevention Research Centre Canada (the lead agency for drowning and water-incident research in Canada), less than 1% of drownings happen in a lifeguard-supervised setting. 68% of drownings occurred from May to September. For children under the age of 5, 97% of drownings were because supervision was absent or distracted. For all drownings, 48% occurred in a lake or pond and 19% in a river.¹¹

So... May to September. Non-supervised settings. Lake, pond or river. THIS is what one should be most concerned about. THIS is EXACTLY the situation at Britannia Beach from May to June 15.

And here’s some more data from the Ontario Non-Fatal Drowning Report, 2023, from the same authors. For every one fatal drowning, there are nearly four non-fatal drownings that require a visit to an emergency department. Non-fatal drowning is a serious problem in Ontario that can have lifelong consequences for individuals and families.¹²

After the boy’s death at Britannia in 2024, Sean Duffy, Vice-President of management and training at Lifesaving Society Ontario, told City News, “We know that 67 to 70 per cent of our fatal drowning incidents are happening in those unsupervised open water settings like lakes, ponds and rivers.” Duffy

added that if people are on a river, to make sure they are in designated swimming areas and lifeguarded beaches, where rescue equipment is.¹³

Also, after the boy's death, the president of the community association immediately east of the beach told CBC News there's a strong case for the lifeguard season to start on the May long weekend and to stretch past 7 p.m. "This beach is a gem in the city and it's very busy ... but it also means there needs to be more attention paid to safety," she said.¹⁴

After the drowning at Britannia in July of 2020, Sean Duffy, then with the Ottawa Drowning Prevention Coalition, told CBC News that rivers are among the most dangerous places to swim, particularly if they're unsupervised. Nearly three out of every 10 drowning deaths over the past decade occurred in rivers. "People may not be familiar with the environment. The bottom of the water may drop out more quickly. There may be hazards under the water [like] undertows and currents," he said.¹⁵

In July 2023, Ontario's Coroner's Office released a report with results from investigating three deaths at Britannia from 2020–2023. It concluded that **all the deaths were new arrivals to Canada, all were novice swimmers, and all were standing or wading close to a drop-off area**. Two of the three drowning events occurred less than a half hour **after lifeguards were officially on duty** at the beach (after 7 p.m.), and the third was within an hour. The report made five recommendations to the City of Ottawa, such as installing "drop off zone markers at the point in the water where the drop off occurs (at water level)" and "The City of Ottawa should identify, on an annual basis, any potential drop hazards in water close to city beaches and consider filing them to reduce risk".¹⁶ The report also suggested the City should "strongly consider" lifeguard staffing at public beaches that coincides with daylight hours.¹⁷

Clearly, during hot and busy days at a beach as dangerous as Britannia, where there have been so many past drownings, ensuring that lifeguards are supervising swimmers is both evidence-based and just pure common sense.

According to the **World Health Organization** (29 August 2024), drowning is the third leading cause of unintentional injury death worldwide, accounting for 9% of all injury-related deaths. Children, males and individuals with increased access to water are most at risk of drowning.

The City's recruitment and budgeting of lifeguards

City of Ottawa representatives have had different perspectives on what to do about safety at Britannia. Regarding **recruiting and scheduling** lifeguards, on June 4, immediately after the boy's death, a city director said the following in a statement to CBC News: "The majority of City lifeguards at beaches and outdoor pools are students participating in our summer employment program. Due to the school year schedule and staff availability for pre-season training and work, the programming hours at outdoor pools and beaches are scheduled within a timeframe that the majority of lifeguards are available to work."¹⁸

In her June 2024 newsletter, soon after the boy's death, Councillor Kavanagh agreed that a key problem is finding enough lifeguards to do the work. "It is already a challenge to fill positions at pools across our city." She added, "The current standards for opening beaches are based on the need to cool off during peak summer days and are tied to school summer holidays."¹⁹

In essence, they are stating that the City cannot provide lifeguards from May to September to supervise citizens, and many children, swimming in a lake/river, and therefore support safety services, because the City works around the schedules of students. But how can this be a rational argument against preventing drownings? It also begs the question as to why is it so hard to recruit lifeguards for the beaches? How much are they paid? What are the benefits? Are lifeguards happy with their work? Must they be bilingual?

Surely the onus is on the City to provide jobs that will attract enough qualified lifeguards to perform this crucial task. Perhaps the City needs to review its recruitment approach and create lifeguarding positions that attract more people of all ages who have different types of schedules.

Diving deeper into the **costs of paying for lifeguards**, in her June 2024 newsletter, soon after the boy's death, Councillor Kavanagh stated the following: "I am aware that extending the supervised beach season would be costly, and this would need to be reflected in our budget priority process. There are three beaches, four if you include Westboro, in Ottawa that would all need the same attention."²⁰

On the evening of 7 October 2024 during a public consultation around the City's budget for 2025, Kavanagh stated, "Lifeguards are ideal but it would be very hard to have it go from Victoria Day. We're hard-pressed to see where it would come from."

However, in 2016, the City had announced that its four beaches would be supervised an extra week that year, after council passed a motion to use \$31,000 in savings from a temporary pool closure to pay for lifeguarding, until the third Sunday in August. Council then agreed to fund the additional week through the budget in the following years.²¹

After the boy's death in 2024, according to CTV News, Councillor Sean Devine submitted an inquiry to City staff asking about additional resources and budget allocations that could be offered for lifeguarding Ottawa beaches, similar to other cities that staff beaches earlier in the summer. As it turns out, the City of Gatineau begins having lifeguards on the beach in early June on Saturdays and Sundays. The National Capital Commission staffed lifeguards at Gatineau Park beaches starting on June 14. Toronto's lifeguards were on duty from the first Saturday in June to September 22.²²

Ottawa Recreation, Culture and Facility Services general manager Dan Chenier told CTV News the city would need to provide additional funding to implement a pilot program to expand lifeguard services and offered three potential pilot projects. The first was having lifeguards for the second weekend of June, extending the season by two days, for \$16,000. The second was adding eight days at the end of the season, including Labour Day, for \$59,000. The third was extending swimming hours each day by one hour until 8 p.m., for \$70,000.²³

Chenier added that the first option, to start lifeguards earlier in June, would be challenging, because most summer employees are still in high school and "college/university students and other adults cannot and do not make up for the lack of high school student availability". Which again begs the question, why? Especially when other cities do manage to recruit lifeguards for earlier in June. On a positive note, Chenier also added that City staff "could tailor job offers and employment terms to include earlier start and later end dates as part of recruiting for the summer season".²⁴ Hopefully, that could mean even better pilot projects than the ones offered above, which should include having lifeguards starting from Victoria Day, when it's already boiling hot.

It's also important to consider the costs of *not* doing more. In Canada, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), the total annual cost of drowning injury is US\$ 173 million! WHO's Global report on drowning also pointed out that drowning has been highly overlooked to date, and that a great deal more should be done by governments and the research and policy communities.²⁵

Education is only one part of the solution

After the near-death incident with the 17-year-old girl in 2023, CBC News reported Councillor Kavanagh recommending that children be encouraged to learn to swim. She said the City of Ottawa could use more public pools to encourage children to learn how to swim starting at a young age. “I think in terms of getting kids into swim lessons, kids learning how to swim young, we don’t have enough pools. We tend to put in splash pads instead of the little wading pools,” she said. “My gut feeling tells me that everybody needs experience in water before they come to a beach.”²⁶

After the death of the boy in June 2024, her personal newsletter on 7 June 2024 had this to say. “It is heartbreaking when we realize that **drowning can be preventable**. Going forward, we need to find ways to spread the message that children in the water need not only to be watched but also to be within arm’s length.”²⁷ She added that “everyone should have the opportunity to take swimming lessons, but currently, it is structured as optional and comes with a cost. The best way to ensure children have equal access to swimming would be through schools”. She also added, “it would be helpful for the education system to at least target low-income communities that do not have access to or resources to pay for lessons for their children. With rising rents and food prices, swimming lessons would not be affordable for many families.”

I don’t question the good wisdom that it would be best if children learned and knew how to swim before entering the water at a beach, and that it’s also a question of making sure kids have opportunities for and access to affordable swim lessons. Many people who flock to the beach come from local neighbourhoods and are new arrivals to Canada with low incomes and have never learned how to swim, even if they lived near water in their own countries. In many of their countries, learning to swim just doesn’t happen for many people. They then come to Canada, which is a place that has a lot to do with experiencing nature and being social and safe. They come to a beach loaded with people having a great time, including swimming in the water. It’s natural they also want to get in, so they do. It appears safe – many people are standing in the water, so one doesn’t expect a sudden drop-off, even if there are warning signs. They would be in a far better position of safety if they knew how to swim and escape from such an unexpected drop-off.

Councillor Theresa Kavanagh also had a suggestion that people be tested before they enter the water at Britannia, but I don’t see how that could be operationalized in practice.

So, of course, education is important. But the problem is that this solution should be implemented *along with* an adequate lifeguarding solution.

A safety audit for Britannia, finally

In its 2023 report, the Ontario Coroner’s Office also recommended the City to conduct a lifesaving audit at the start of every season at the City’s beaches.²⁸ That didn’t happen at the start of 2024. In fact, the last safety audit was 14 years ago, in 2000, said Michael Shane, safety management director of Lifesaving Society’s Ontario branch, to CBC News.²⁹

According to CityNews, after the boy’s death at Britannia in June 2024, the Coroner again recommended the safety audit be conducted. Near the end of the 2024 season, the City finally agreed and announced that all of its Ottawa beaches would undergo safety audits. The Lifesaving Society was commissioned to conduct them, to take place in August before beach closures. Audits ensure beaches meet safety standards, identify potential hazards, and help “setting up lifeguards for success”, said Shane. A report will then be presented to councillors in the fall, along with recommendations.³⁰

However, the results of the safety audit could take months. The city will be working on its budget for 2025 from now until December and it would be a shame if they received the safety audit after finalizing the 2025 budget.

Extend the lifeguarding season and hours

It's clear that the beach is dangerous and, as a result, people are drowning. The status quo is not enough, and more people are at grave risk in the future, including in 2025.

The results of this report lead to a recommendation that the City should:

Through the 2025 City budget, extend the lifeguarding season at Britannia Beach in 2025 (and after) from Victoria Day weekend to Labour Day weekend, and until 8 p.m. each day.

It seems clear from the experts and the evidence that having lifeguards supervise an open setting such as Britannia Beach should be the priority, and that the lifeguarding season should start in May and last until at least Labour Day weekend, after which schools start up again. The statistic that less than 1% of drownings happen in a lifeguard-supervised setting in Ontario is particularly convincing and compelling. As is the 2023 Coroner's Office report – all three deaths it investigated were new arrivals to Canada, novice swimmers, near the drop-off, and died soon after lifeguards went home for the day. This also means lifeguards should be on duty after 7 p.m.

Drownings are preventable. And public safety decision-makers need to strike the correct balance between what is expected of a city to prevent drownings and what is expected of an individual in terms of self-responsibility. Of course, people should seek, on their own accord, to learn how to swim better, understand the environment they are entering, and pay attention to signs and flags. But one can expect that personal sense of responsibility to have limitations in the real world, especially on a beautiful hot day when hundreds of people are having a wonderful time swimming in what appears to be a safe and shallow beach area. This is where essential lifeguarding is critical – it's not an "extra layer" of protection but rather the most important layer.

The focus should be on needs and saving lives, not on the schedules of high-school students. The costs of not doing more are even greater. WHO has stated that governments should do more to prevent drownings.

July 25 is World Drowning Prevention Day. Let's celebrate the Day in 2025 by commending the City for having taken this important lifesaving step, which resulted in no drownings at Britannia Beach from Victoria Day weekend to July 25!

The solution is there. Nobody wants to wake up next summer and hear that another child has died at Britannia Beach, just because that child didn't know how to swim.

Beach water is often polluted

The City conducts beach water quality testing at its supervised beaches. Water samples were collected daily between June 15 and August 25, 2024, and tested for the presence of E. coli bacteria. The City states, "When elevated levels of E. coli are detected in the water, it is more likely that other disease-causing organisms are also present. These organisms can result in skin, ear, throat or gastro-intestinal illnesses."³¹

On 27 August 2024, CityNews reported that Britannia Beach was closed for nine days in the summer of 2024 [within the period when the City tests the beach], or about 12.5% of the time.³²

Jet skis do whatever they want

Jet skis flying near to and through the bay at Britannia are a constant feature, especially on busy days, it seems. With their music loud, their drivers appear to be providing some kind of a show for others at the beach. Not everyone wants such a show. And laws are being broken.

According to “the intrepid cottage.com”, in their “Tips to avoid enforcement hassles on Canadian waters”, all of Ontario’s personal watercraft (PWC) boating regulations apply to personal watercraft, including jet skis. While boating regulations may be primarily enforced by provincial and regional police services, the regulations themselves are federal. In Canada, two “licences” are necessary for operating a boat, both issued by Transport Canada: a pleasure craft licence (like a licence plate) and a pleasure craft operator’s licence (like a driver’s licence, which you get after you pass a test).³³

The 2013 Shoreline Speed Restriction Law applies to freshwater boating in Ontario and many other provinces and makes it illegal to operate any powerboat faster than 10 km/h within 30 metres (100’) of shore. Except for officially post speed zones, there is no speed limit on the water. However, the Small Vessel Regulations include a Prohibition Against Careless Operation, and the Criminal Code of Canada states that dangerous operating practices are illegal. An enforcement officer can use either of these to charge an excessive speeder if the behaviour appears careless or dangerous: \$350 fine for operating a boat in a careless manner or the \$500 penalty for operating in an unsafe manner.³⁴

The jet skis that fly around Britannia Beach are a serious hazard and pose a grave threat to swimmers throughout the bay. There are laws and regulations in place to manage this. But more needs to be done by Ottawa police to enforce these laws, before this too leads to a serious accident or death.

In a message to me on 2 October 2024, Councillor Kavanagh’s office noted that she is aware of the concerns related to jet ski users near the beach area and has been in contact with Ottawa Police Services (OPS). “OPS are taking this very seriously and have advised the Councillor that they are reviewing a variety of options on how best to address the issue and will get back to us with an update once they have details to provide.”

I look forward to receiving a response to my questions about whether they received the update yet, and whether there had been other updates from OPS in the past.

References

- ¹ Daily data report for May 2024. Government of Canada; 27 June 2024 (https://climate.weather.gc.ca/climate_data/daily_data_e.html?hlyRange=%7C&dlyRange=1889-11-01%7C2024-05-20&mlyRange=1889-01-01%7C2006-12-01&StationID=4333&Prov=ON&urlExtension=_e.html&searchType=stnName&optLimit=specDate&StartYear=1840&EndYear=2024&selRowPerPage=25&Line=0&searchMethod=contains&Month=5&Day=20&txtStationName=ottawa&timeframe=2&Year=2024, accessed 26 September 2024).
- ² Child in life-threatening condition after rescue from Britannia Beach. Ottawa: CBC News; 3 June 2024 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/child-in-life-threatening-condition-after-rescue-from-britannia-beach-1.7223432>).
- ³ Boy, 9, dead after being pulled from water at Britannia Beach. Ottawa: CBC News; 4 June 2024 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/britannia-beach-dead-child-june-2024-1.7222570>).
- ⁴ Huston G. Man dies after being rescued near Britannia Beach. Ottawa: 28 May 2024 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/man-dies-after-being-rescued-near-britannia-beach-1.7216980>).
- ⁵ O'Neill N. Amid recent cases of water-related deaths in Ottawa, officials explain why. Ottawa: CityNews; 11 June 2024 (<https://ottawa.citynews.ca/2024/06/11/amid-fatal-water-rescues-in-ottawa-officials-urging-caution/#:~:text=Statistics%20from%20the%20Lifesaving%20Society,2011%20to%20211%20in%202020>).
- ⁶ Teen girl in critical condition after rescue from water at Britannia Beach. Ottawa: CBC News; 9 July 2023 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/britannia-beach-ottawa-swimmer-rescue-life-guard-1.6901695>).
- ⁷ Cotnam H. Dredging to begin at Britannia Beach. Ottawa: CBC News; 6 July 2020 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/britannia-beach-dredging-work-proceeding-despite-covid-19-1.5636442>).
- ⁸ Swimmer dead in Ottawa's 2nd drowning in 2 days. Ottawa: CBC News; 5 July 2020 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/20-year-old-dead-after-second-drowning-1.5638204>).
- ⁹ Near drowning today at Britannia Beach due dangerous dredging issues. reddit/Ottawa [local news and discussions] (https://www.reddit.com/r/ottawa/comments/ne4y6v/near_drowning_today_at_britannia_beach_due/?rdt=49255).
- ¹⁰ Decaire C. City officials emphasize water safety after high number of rescues. Ottawa: CBC News; 11 July 2023 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/water-safety-concerns-ottawa-gatineau-1.6902679#:~:text=Caroline%20Gallant%2C%20who%20works%20with,particularly%20strong%20in%20the%20water>).
- ¹¹ Drowning Report: Ontario 2024 Edition. Prepared for the Lifesaving Society by the Drowning Prevention Research Centre Canada: 2024 (https://www.lifesavingsociety.com/media/430052/on%20fatal%20infographic%202024_en_final.pdf).
- ¹² Ontario Non-Fatal Drowning Report, 2023. Prepared for the Lifesaving Society Ontario by the Drowning Prevention Research Centre Canada; 2023 (<https://www.lifesavingsociety.com/media/407203/ontariononfataldrowningreport2023-20231020.pdf>).
- ¹³ O'Neill N. Amid recent cases of water-related deaths in Ottawa, officials explain why. Ottawa: CityNews; 11 June 2024 (<https://ottawa.citynews.ca/2024/06/11/amid-fatal-water-rescues-in-ottawa-officials-urging-caution/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWe%20know%20that%2067%20to,do%20to%20keep%20yourself%20safe.%E2%80%9D>).
- ¹⁴ Boy, 9, dead after being pulled from water at Britannia Beach. Ottawa: CBC News; 4 June 2024 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/britannia-beach-dead-child-june-2024-1.7222570>).
- ¹⁵ Swimmer dead in Ottawa's 2nd drowning in 2 days. Ottawa: CBC News; 5 July 2020 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/20-year-old-dead-after-second-drowning-1.5638204>).
- ¹⁶ Pringle J. Safety audits to be conducted at all Ottawa beaches in August. Ottawa: CTV News; 1 August 2024 (<https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/safety-audits-to-be-conducted-at-all-ottawa-beaches-in-august-1.6985470>).
- ¹⁷ Weller E, Taekema D. Ottawa beaches to be safety audited, after multiple drownings. Ottawa; CBC News; 1 August 2024 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/ottawa-beaches-to-be-safety-audited-after-multiple-drownings-1.7280940#:~:text=A%20year%20ago%20in%20July,to%20be%20%22novice%20swimmers.%22>).
- ¹⁸ Boy, 9, dead after being pulled from water at Britannia Beach. Ottawa: CBC News; 4 June 2024 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/britannia-beach-dead-child-june-2024-1.7222570>).
- ¹⁹ Message from the Councillor. In: Welcome to Bay Ward [website]. Ottawa; 7 June 2024 (https://www.baywardbulletin.ca/message-from-the-councillor-13/?mc_cid=cb4ece0a9a&mc_eid=e85e928df3).

-
- ²⁰ Message from the Councillor. In: Welcome to Bay Ward [website]. Ottawa; 7 June 2024 (https://www.baywardbulletin.ca/message-from-the-councillor-13/?mc_cid=cb4ece0a9a&mc_eid=e85e928df3).
- ²¹ Chianello J. Ottawa beaches to stay open 1 week longer this summer. Ottawa: CBC News; 23 March 2016 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/ottawa-beaches-open-longer-1.3504000>).
- ²² Pringle J. Keeping lifeguards on duty at Ottawa beaches until Labour Day would cost \$59,000, staff say. Ottawa: CTV News; 16 September 2024 (<https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/keeping-lifeguards-on-duty-at-ottawa-beaches-until-labour-day-would-cost-59-000-staff-say-1.7039172>).
- ²³ Pringle J. Keeping lifeguards on duty at Ottawa beaches until Labour Day would cost \$59,000, staff say. Ottawa: CTV News; 16 September 2024 (<https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/keeping-lifeguards-on-duty-at-ottawa-beaches-until-labour-day-would-cost-59-000-staff-say-1.7039172>).
- ²⁴ Pringle J. Keeping lifeguards on duty at Ottawa beaches until Labour Day would cost \$59,000, staff say. Ottawa: CTV News; 16 September 2024 (<https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/keeping-lifeguards-on-duty-at-ottawa-beaches-until-labour-day-would-cost-59-000-staff-say-1.7039172>).
- ²⁵ Drowning [website]. Geneva: World Health Organization; 29 August 2024 (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/drowning>).
- ²⁶ Decaire C. City officials emphasize water safety after high number of rescues. Ottawa: CBC News; 11 July 2023 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/water-safety-concerns-ottawa-gatineau-1.6902679#:~:text=Caroline%20Gallant%2C%20who%20works%20with,particularly%20strong%20in%20the%20water.>).
- ²⁷ Message from the Councillor. In: Welcome to Bay Ward [website]. Ottawa; 7 June 2024 (https://www.baywardbulletin.ca/message-from-the-councillor-13/?mc_cid=cb4ece0a9a&mc_eid=e85e928df3).
- ²⁸ Pringle J. Safety audits to be conducted at all Ottawa beaches in August. Ottawa: CTV News; 1 August 2024 (<https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/safety-audits-to-be-conducted-at-all-ottawa-beaches-in-august-1.6985470>).
- ²⁹ Weller E, Taekema D. Ottawa beaches to be safety audited, after multiple drownings. Ottawa: CBC News; 1 August 2024 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/ottawa-beaches-to-be-safety-audited-after-multiple-drownings-1.7280940#:~:text=A%20year%20ago%20in%20July,to%20be%20%22novice%20swimmers.%22>).
- ³⁰ Pringle J. Safety audits to be conducted at all Ottawa beaches in August. Ottawa: CTV News; 1 August 2024 (<https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/safety-audits-to-be-conducted-at-all-ottawa-beaches-in-august-1.6985470>).
- ³¹ Beach Water Quality Results [website]. Ottawa Public Health (<https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-services/beach-water-quality-results.aspx>).
- ³² O'Neill N. One Ottawa beach has closed for a third of the summer. Here's why. Ottawa: CityNews; 27 August 2024 (<https://ottawa.citynews.ca/2024/08/27/one-ottawa-beach-closed-for-a-third-of-the-summer-due-to-e-coli/>).
- ³³ Nicholson C. Ontario PWC Boating Regs For Jet Ski Riders. In: the intrepid Cottager.com [website]. (<https://intrepidcottager.com/ontario-boating-regs/>).
- ³⁴ Nicholson C. Ontario PWC Boating Regs For Jet Ski Riders. In: the intrepid Cottager.com [website]. (<https://intrepidcottager.com/ontario-boating-regs/>).