

By Jackson Kuhl

Pleasure Beach Blues

Only in Bridgeport could prime beachfront real estate be allowed to slip into years of neglect.

JUST OFF THE COAST OF BRIDGEPORT LIES THE LONELY BARRIER PENINSULA OF PLEASURE BEACH. In the waning days of summer, you can wander through the remnants of the old amusement park here, listen to crying ospreys or watch the tide run in crystalline streams from Long Island Sound into a small lagoon. Whatever you do, you will be utterly alone on these 60-something acres. Pleasure Beach is deserted, and has been for the past 14 years.

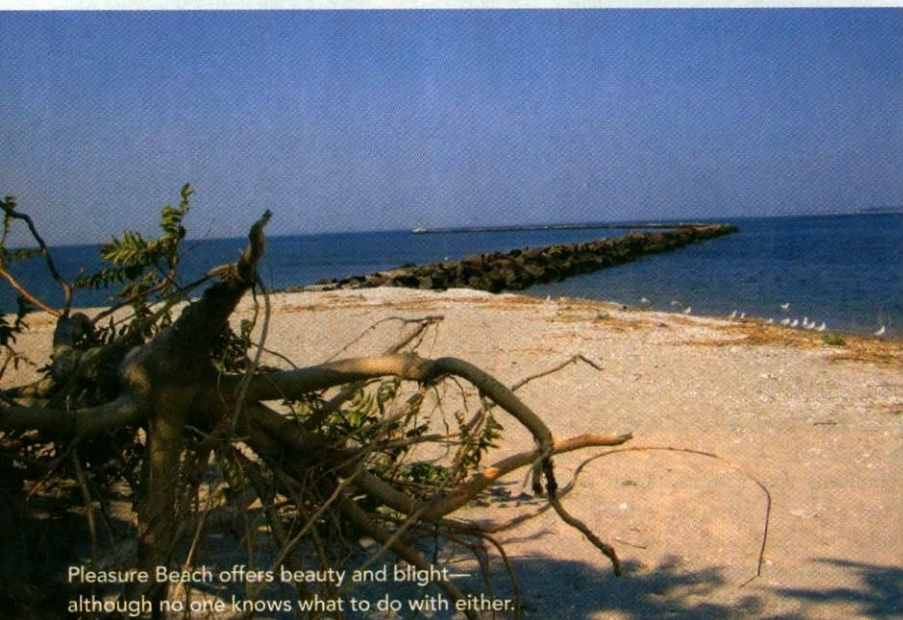
On June 16, 1996, a cigarette butt or match ignited the swing bridge leading from the mainland to scenic Pleasure Beach. It was spun to the open position, where the fire reduced it to charred bones and ribs. Stranded cars were evacuated on the Port Jefferson ferry and, two weeks later, Bridgeport's Board of Park Commissioners closed Pleasure Beach to visitors. It's been closed ever since.

Today, Pleasure Beach can only be accessed by boat or a two-mile hike along the narrow strand from Stratford. Those willing to make the effort will find an abandoned place of weed-cracked pavement, wild

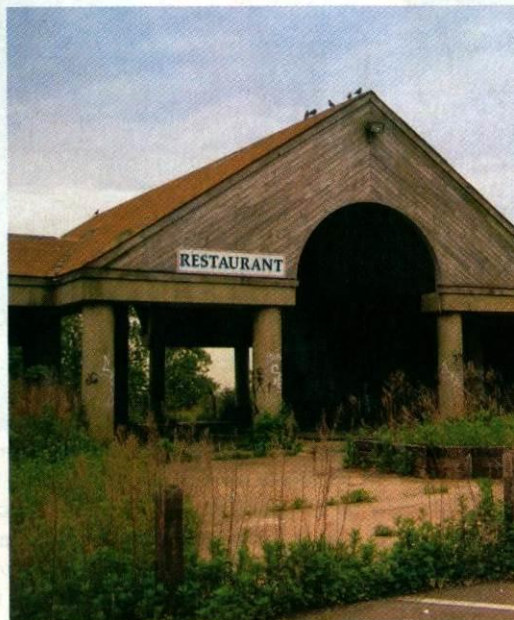
or Donald Trump to develop a theme park on the site went nowhere.

These days Bridgeport claims it wants to revitalize Pleasure Beach with a \$1.9 million federal appropriation and another \$2 million in city funds. Grants from the state Department of Environmental Protection are also being sought. But don't pack your towel and sunscreen just yet. Before that happens, the docks must be checked and, if needed, repaired; the swimming pavilion must be refurbished; studies done about environmental impact; decisions made about what to do with ruins like the Polka Dot Playhouse. It's not even certain whether a proposed water taxi will operate from the East End of the city or from the Port Jeff ferry terminal on the far side of the harbor. No one has a specific plan or timetable for any of this.

Tim English of SavePleasureBeach.com, a website advocating the site's restoration as a public park, says Pleasure Beach hasn't exactly been a priority for the city. "During the Ganim administration, the state Department of Transportation offered a \$23 million grant to re-



Pleasure Beach offers beauty and blight—although no one knows what to do with either.



turkeys and wind sighing through the dune grass—and to think, this is in Fairfield County, where beachfront lots run \$1 million plus. According to the Bridgeport Parks and Recreation Department, simply setting foot upon Pleasure Beach will get you a \$99 fine (a questionable assertion, considering the land below the high-tide mark is open to all).

Even before the bridge fire, Pleasure Beach had been in decline from its heyday, when thousands used to flock here to enjoy waterfront fun. Bridgeport purchased the land in 1919 for \$220,000, and 18 years later assumed control of the amusement park founded in 1892. But in the 1960s, the park went bankrupt and most of the rides and equipment were sold at auction. In 1973, the ballroom burned and by the 1980s, newspaper accounts described the former summer destination as neglected and vandalized, with hypodermic needles dotting the shore and crack vials littering the parking lot. Plans in the 1980s for a local group to build a marine-centric "Amazement Park"

pair the bridge," he says. "Ganim's aide complained that it was only two lanes. After six months, the state withdrew the offer because Bridgeport did not seem interested."

English suspects the questionable demolition last fall of the old carousel and bumper-car pavilion—now just heaps of rubble that have yet to be removed—had nothing to do with safety and everything to do with making the site more attractive to private developers.

Still, no one knows when Pleasure Beach will be reopened to the public or if the water taxi will ever come to fruition. The mayor's office refuses to give a deadline. A spokeswoman for the parks department says, "Possibly next year."

So at a time when developing such a potential revenue resource seems like a no-brainer, taxpayers can look at Pleasure Beach wasting away from afar or, in an act of civil disobedience, venture out to enjoy its solitude. Maybe in 2011, they'll reap some benefits from a paradise lost.