

# State's beach park for disabled still shut

After a management transfer, Rish Park slated to reopen in 2023

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USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Advocates for the disabled have called and written state government for more than a year, wanting to know when Florida's only park specifically for people with disabilities will reopen.

The William J. Rish Recreational Park has been closed since October 2018, leaving wheelchair users and others without "a barrier-free beach experience," the park's supporters say.

The park had been managed by Florida's Agency for Persons with Disabilities. But groups such as the Friends of Billy Joe Rish Park and the Wheelchair Highwaymen say they've gotten little information about repairs and renovations — another sign, they say, of how poorly the agency has managed the beachfront facility for decades.

Drone video recorded 10 months after Hurricane Michael's 160 mph winds blew through Gulf County showed damage to a boardwalk and a cottage's roof but little else.

Then recently, APD suddenly announced it was handing the park over to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, which oversees the state's award-winning parks, in which all facilities comply with federal Americans with Disabilities Act standards.

Advocates such as Tallahassee attorney J.R. Harding greeted the news with cautious optimism while acknowledging a frustrating reality: He finally received a timeline from the state now putting the park's reopening at January 2023.

That will make a total of "12 Memorial (Days), Fourth of Julys and Labor Days lost forever," he said. "Four summers that individuals with disabilities are denied access to the state of Florida's premier beach outdoor recreational location."

An APD spokesperson announced the park's transfer to DEP when asked about the park Sept. 13 but did not respond to specific questions until

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# Rish Park

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Oct. 4, after this story appeared online. The department also did not address advocates' specific concerns and allegations.

Every year, the park typically attracted between 4,000 and 4,500 visitors with physical or developmental disabilities. People would write about their Rish Park experiences at a website the Wheelchair Highwaymen created as part of their reopening campaign.

"My husband went into a swimming pool at Rish Park for the first time after his spinal cord injury in a family pool accident 30 years earlier," commenter Deb McLeod said. "We've been waiting so long for it to reopen."

Another, Donna Dickens, wrote about her traveling down by the beach by herself.

"I looked back at the (wheelchair) tracks in the sand and the distance I traveled and realized that I have never gone on a stroll on the beach by myself," she wrote. "I felt I had been given a gift. I would like to experience that again."

## 'Everything is open — but the park'

The Legislature created the park in 1978 on 98 acres of St. Joseph Peninsula, about 100 miles southwest of Tallahassee. It was named after state Rep. Billy Joe Rish of Port St. Joe, who championed the idea of a park for the disabled during his four terms in the Florida House.

But not anymore. As Harding put it, "You go out to the Cape; the whole world is enjoying the beach. Everything is open — but the park."

The Wheelchair Highwaymen say they've been unable to confirm the current condition of the eight overnight cabins for families and the six dormitories with accommodations for up to 16 that include accessible bathroom facilities.

Neither can they get information on

the state of the two miles of wide boardwalk that connects the buildings to the dunes along the Gulf. They span across the scrub land to the bay and provide access to an Olympic-size pool.

Dr. Max Lee, a Gainesville engineer and another Wheelchair Highwayman, flew drones over the park and spotted roof damage to the event hall and to a cottage, among others.

Added Angela Morrison, a Tallahassee lawyer volunteering with Friends of Billy Joe Rish Park: "Filing public records request is the only way I've been able to know when construction is going to be done, what's the cost, how's it being funded and what money remains."

Morrison's last information request took 45 days for a response and produced two documents. They arrived late in the afternoon on the day a reporter had called the agency about park supporters' concerns.

Public records showed repairs to a cabin, the manager's residence, a boardwalk segment and a pool cabana had been completed, but no details — financial or other — about the work.

"A pristine Olympic-sized pool with access for people in wheelchairs, they've refused to let anyone use for three years, because of problems with a family cabin that have nothing to do with the pool," Morrison said, scanning the documents.

## Making Rish Park even more accessible

Harding and Lee said when they began talks with APD in the summer of 2020 they had hopes of providing input from the disability community about repairs to make the park more accessible.

But, according to Lee, communication with the agency stopped after Lee requested an accessibility audit of the park, required by the Americans with Disabilities Act. He also alerted the state that the park, ironically, had no handicapped parking spaces.

"As soon as we pointed out the ADA audit, they realized they hadn't done one for the last 30 years ... They locked down and just will not talk to us," Lee

said.

In fact, the audit request itself may have delayed the park's reopening, according to state Rep. Jason Shoaf, R-Port St. Joe. He said he had been discussing with other lawmakers whether an agency other than APD should manage the park.

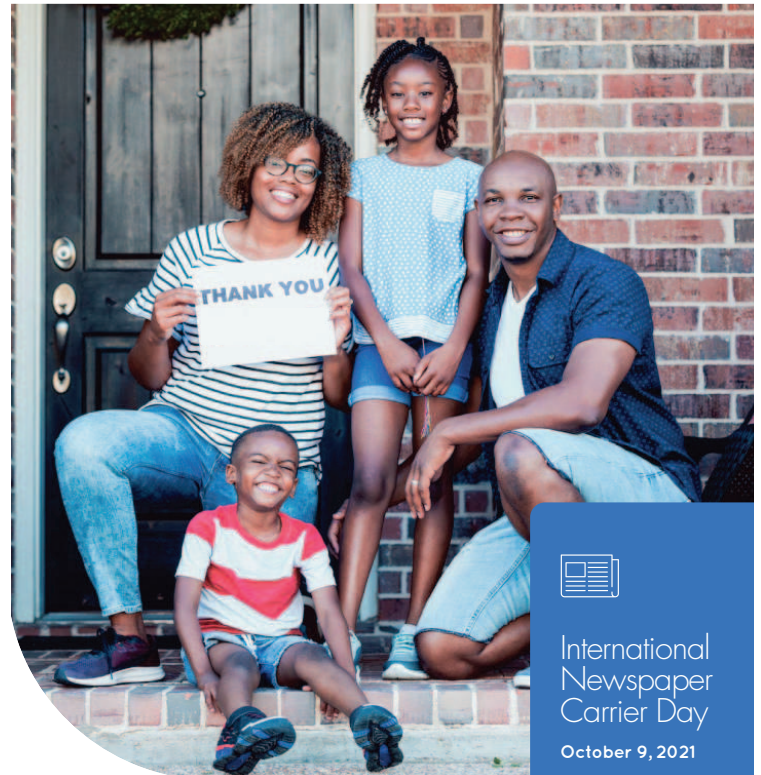
In fact, a DEP spokesperson said its Park Service will work "as quickly as possible" to reopen Rish Park.

"In the coming months, DEP will be working with the Agency for Persons

with Disabilities to continue facility improvements and begin developing the park's Unit Management Plan," said Alexandra Kutcha, DEP's press secretary.

"We look forward to working closely with the public and stakeholders as the park joins the Florida Park Service and to opening the park to the public."

*James Call is a member of the USA TODAY NETWORK — Florida Capital Bureau. He can be reached at jcall@tallahassee.com. Follow on him Twitter. @CallTallahassee.*



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William J. Rish Recreation Park remains closed. AGENCY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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