

Landowners, Chikaming Township, and Berrien County Cooperate for Lakefront Public Safety

The following is an email written by Brian Kern of the Chikaming Township Public Safety Commission on January 26, 2006: “Dorothy and I were walking on the beach today and we were thinking about exactly where are we? What if we needed help for a medical, police or fire emergency? We have a cell phone and even a signal, but where the heck are we? If I called, even knowing the basic area, all I could say is north of Harbert beach and south of Warren Dunes. We could not give a street or a closer point of access. What about a tourist? We thought back a few 4th of Julys ago about the guy who found the lady, who washed up just south of us, and called it in and gave the wrong location. Signs? ! I know there is an issue with the beaches being private, but we were trying to come up with some way to mark the beach every ¼ mile or so. This way people could give better information if they had to call for HELP.”

The idea was embraced by the Commission and Police Chief Jim Stormont and Fire Chief Mike Davidson. Both chiefs attested that a lot of precious time is wasted trying to locate a person in trouble and finding an access point to bring rescue personnel and equipment onto the beach. Conferring with the Berrien County 911 system, they learned that they would support and even applaud this effort. If Chikaming marked their seven miles of beach and coordinated those markers with access points, this information would go into the 911 system. The Commission decided that the best way to



Police Chief Jim Stormont with Fire Chief Mike Davidson installing markers on the beach.

locate the markers would be using GPS coordinates. The use of GPS coordinates received added approval from the Coast Guard and Air Rescue so if someone said that they were by mile marker 10.2, they would have the exact coordinates to go to. It was a win/win situation for everyone involved.

The proposal was presented to the Township Board and they voted funds to proceed with the project as long as the Commission received the support of the property owners along the lakefront, especially where the markers would be placed. An informative letter went out to all the property owners along the lakefront and Commission members were on hand at Chikaming's Sesquicentennial Celebration in 2006 with a sample marker to explain the project and answer any questions.

Getting positive feedback from the public, the Township's engineering firm, Merritt Engineering, was hired to prepare a map showing all lakefront properties, locating where the mile markers would be placed, and their GPS coordinates. Letters requiring a signature went out to identified property owners along with a picture of the proposed marker.

Originally, the commission was considering a four inch by four inch square marker of blue plastic composite anchored in concrete that would protrude four feet above the sand. However, the logistics of digging the holes and pouring the concrete made the project quite costly and labor intensive. They decided on using Quantum Flex's fiberglass utility markers in blue that are four inches wide, a half inch thick and 84 inches long. Each marker has the township's logo, what mile marker it is and the words, "EMERGENCY CALL 911". Kern designed an anchoring system for the bottom of the markers to make them easier to install and resistant from unauthorized removal.

The Army Corps of Engineers heard about the project and directed the Township to contact the Department of Environmental Quality. Penny Holt of the Lakes, Streams, and Shorelands Section, Land and Water Management Division reviewed the project and responded that the Township did not require a DEQ permit for the placement of the posts either under Part 353, Sand Dunes Protection and Management or Part 325, Submerged Lands. However she did ask that they be placed as far landward into the vegetation area as was reasonable yet remain effective and when the Lake Michigan water levels rise to the point where storm surges threaten the posts, that they be relocated farther inland.

The Public Safety Commission is currently working on an informative piece that will explain that the markers are approximately one tenth of a mile apart starting with marker 7.8 at the southern end of the township at the Union Pier access at Townline Road. From there they extend in a northerly direction to marker number 14.6 at the northern border. The numbering is based on the Michigan-Indiana state line and they roughly follow the curvature of the natural shore line.

If you are on the beach and recognize any emergency situation requiring police, fire, paramedic or Coast Guard attention, simply call 911. Provide the 911 operator with the type of emergency and that you are on the Lake Michigan shore and the mile number of the blue marker nearest you. Please note that if you are calling from a cellular phone, often your 911 call will be routed to a Chicago or Indiana center. If this happens, you need to tell them you want to be routed to the Berrien County, MI 911 Center. You can also access local emergency authority by dialing 1-269/756-1111.