

RI BUSINESS

A famed R.I. restaurateur, scores of objections, and a 3-acre oyster farm

A Coastal Resources Management Council panel vote against the owner of the Matunuck Oyster Bar highlights the fraught tensions between two key uses of the shore in the Ocean State: food and fun.

By [Brian Amaral](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 9, 2021, 7:40 p.m.



Opponents of an aquaculture farm staged what they called a "float-in" in 2018 to "Save Potter Pond" in South Kingstown, R.I. A subcommittee of a coastal regulator voted against the project on Nov. 9, 2021, although the four-year saga will continue. PHOTO COURTESY OF TODD CORAYE OF FISH WRAP RI OG

PROVIDENCE — The four-year fight over a proposed oyster and scallop farm has involved engineering and ecology studies, high-powered law firms, and a kayak-borne protest that participants called a “float-in.” The battle pits the owner of one of the most famous restaurants in Rhode Island against scores of objectors, who worry about squeezing access to a prized stretch of the state’s shore.

And it took another turn on Tuesday night, when a four-member subcommittee of the Coastal Resources Management Council voted to recommend denying permission for Perry Raso, the owner of the Matunuck Oyster Bar, to start a three-acre oyster and scallop farm on Segar Cove in South Kingstown.

The vote at a windowless Capitol Hill conference room was welcome news to opponents of the project, although it was a largely foregone conclusion — they were technically ratifying a vote they took back in March. It’s also not the last the CRMC will have to say on the matter. But the situation highlights the fraught tensions between two key uses of the shore in the Ocean State: food and fun.

“I think it would be a travesty to ignore all these voices, and all this testimony, from all these recreational users,” said objector Todd Corayer, a South Kingstown resident who writes the blog [Fish Wrap Writer](#). “I don’t want to see CRMC ignore significant historic uses of the water body just to favor a small private business.”

Raso declined to comment after the meeting. The proposed three-acre aquaculture farm in Segar Cove, which is within Potter Pond, would add to the seven-acre oyster farm he already has in another part of the salt pond.

“When I started in this industry, everybody was rooting for the farmer,” Raso said in 2018, according to an article in [Rhode Island Monthly](#). “I don’t sense that anymore.”

The saga of Segar Cove has dragged on for years, and it did not end Tuesday night. The full Coastal Resources Management Council, which is made up of gubernatorial appointees, will have to act on Raso’s lease application. A date for that hasn’t yet been set. They’ll have 33 hours of testimony to consider.

Raso’s Matunuck Oyster Bar is one of the best known restaurants in Rhode Island, and if you haven’t been able to get a table there just yet — it books well in advance for prime dinner times, especially in the summer season — you may have seen its ads at the airport, which show the harvesting of seafood in the morning in one photo and its presentation on a dinner plate hours later in another.

Raso has been a local pioneer of that hyperlocal food source, a local kid who grew up digging for littlenecks, graduated from the University of Rhode Island, and started an aquaculture farm in 2002 from a single acre in Potter Pond. That farm eventually grew to seven acres.

The three more acres he’s been trying to get since 2017 would supply not just local restaurants, but others in the region, and help him expand more into scallops. The oysters currently farmed in Matunuck are sold to restaurants and distributors as far away as Chicago and Washington, D.C.

He’s pledged that he’ll work to limit any impact in the area. His workers won’t use any

radios or heavy equipment like power washers. The cages will be low-profile. They'll even limit their hours from November to March to account for migratory birds.

Day-to-day, employees there would haul lantern nets out of the water, emptying them and the floating cages and separating the oysters and scallops by hand. They'd be brought to market by combination of boat and truck.

Almost every day for months in 2019, Raso, who lives nearby, went out to Segar Cove and took a picture at around noon. The place was almost always empty, he said.

His arguments convinced the professional staff of the CRMC, which recommended its approval. David Beutel, the CRMC's since-retired aquaculture director, rejected the opponents' arguments one by one. There's no good evidence that property values would suffer, he said. Oysters are a net benefit from the surrounding environment. And although some people raised objections about the Matunuck Oyster Bar in general, the restaurant itself isn't involved in the application, just its owner, Beutel said.

It would also use only 3 percent of the area of the pond, less than the regulatory guideline of 5 percent.

But the subcommittee — officially called the Perry Raso subcommittee, because that's all it's dealing with — went against that recommendation. Although the project wouldn't pose hazards to plant and animal life or water quality, and the project took steps to account for any "scenic impact," it would pose safety hazards for boats, swimmers, paddleboarders and other recreational users, they found. They affirmed that again Tuesday night.

"It just came down to a significant conflict with recreational use," said Christian Capizzo, a lawyer for Partridge Snow & Hahn who's representing objectors.

Though Capizzo is representing the waterfront property owners, he also noted that there were many other users of Potter Pond — waterskiers, paddleboarders, kayakers, sailboaters, anglers, shellfishers — who objected.

Raso's lawyer, Beth Noonan with the firm Adler Pollock & Sheehan, declined to comment.

David Latham, who recently moved to the Matunuck full time and whose family members own houses on the pond, said opponents like him aren't against Raso, or his Matunuck Oyster Bar. In fact people love it. They're not NIMBYs, he said. They're just against what they view as favoring one use of Segar Cove over another.

"Perry sees only oysters, and profits," Latham said. "He's a businessman, and I don't blame him for trying to expand his business. But the issue for the state is, you're obligated to balance everybody's interests here."

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