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Summertime, and the livin' is . . . sponsored



By MARGARET LITTMAN |

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Montrose Beach on Chicago's North Side

John R. Boehm

My kneejerk response when I first heard that the Chicago Park District had named Tommy Bahama the “**official sponsor of summer**” was, “Is there anything the city of Chicago won't sell?” Parking meters were one thing. But summer? To me, that's sacred.

I'm long past the point where the words “school's out for summer” have any real application to my life, but they still elicit a primal sense of liberation, one I usually first indulge with a drive down Lake Shore Drive with the sunroof open, the windows down and the stereo up. The season of summer has been doing all right, as far as I can tell, without a corporate sponsor for, well, since the planet started going 'round the sun. It comes back every year (somewhat) reliably and, particularly after a long, hard polar vortex, is welcomed by sun-starved Chicagoans. No underwriting necessary.

Chicago's 27 CPD-managed beaches open for the season today, and on the backs of more than 400 lifeguards will be an official uniform of custom-designed Tommy Bahama gear, including rash guards, hats and board shorts.

The clothing company, which has two stores on Michigan Avenue and two in the suburbs, approached the CPD suggesting the partnership to build its brand of beach-friendly apparel in Chicago. The sponsorship package includes the funding of 25 scholarships to the CPD's Junior Lifeguard Program and the underwriting of several special events, including the Jay Cutler Foundation Charity Beach Volleyball Tournament in July. The scholarships in particular, said Rob Goldberg, executive vice president of marketing at Seattle-based Tommy Bahama, make a pricey program accessible to students who might not otherwise participate.

IT'S ABOUT THE MONEY

Of course, the CPD, like every other municipality or department, needs cash. And this is a promotion that undeniably helps the people who live and play in the city.

That softens me to the idea a little — the same kind of mellow I get after a few hours at the beach in the sun. I can't remember what had me annoyed before I got the dose of vitamin D. There's plenty of precedent for such deals. Toyota trucks are the official vehicle of the city of San Diego's lifeguards, for example. At the CPD alone, there's a list of projects in need of deep-pocketed benefactors, including ballfields, playgrounds and tennis courts.

But there's something about it utzing me like beach sand stuck in my shoe. Tommy Bahama is the everywhere beach brand. Solid and stylish. It fits with its national retail neighbors along Michigan Avenue. But I wish that if the season itself was out for bid, it could have been a local brand — not just a national company with local ties — that had the backs of park district lifeguards.

I'm not looking for local for the sake of being a locavore. But local because, while, Chicago's lakefront is legendary, its beaches aren't like everywhere else's. Yes, Oak Street or North Avenue have beer-commercial-worthy bathers. But Foster Avenue Beach is not Florida's Grayton Beach. Not better. Not worse. But not the same. Why not find a partner who brings our essence to the beach?

I'm not talking about Vienna Beef strategically putting its name on a Speedo (although that could be hilarious), but a local company that captures the Chicago-ness of our beaches. There must be a local apparel maker whose name captures the stripped-down essence of the season. **Threadless** Summer, anyone?



Griffin Norman

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Twibster — It would seem that companies with highly complex and technologically advanced products (e.g., Microsoft, Apple,

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