I love it! Government in general and Chicago's park district in particular is letting us decide whether we should swim in our own effluent or not.

Paralleling astronaut Neil Armstrong's first small step on the moon, I see this as one small swim for mankind. With luck, the contagion will grow, other stupid rules will fall aside, common sense will prevail and social Darwinism -- the good kind -- will make the world a better place.

This is the hyperbolic lesson I draw from a single point of reference: a story from the Chicago Tribune drawn to my attention through a weekly online newsletter about environmental stories concerning the Great Lakes.

The background for Chicago's local story mimics that of parks in Connecticut and practically every public beach north of the tropics. Summer has arrived. Beaches are opening. Families are getting excited. E. coli counts are rising. Beaches are closing. Families are being disappointed.

"E" stands for escherichia. When combined with coli it means a rod-shaped bacterium that thrives in the intestines of warm-blooded creatures like us, our dogs and waterfowl such as gulls and geese. Most of the strains are innocuous, but some can be quite nasty, alimentary speaking. Because E. coli are common, can survive for some time in open water and are easily identifiable, they've become the main indicator organism for all fecal contamination, aka crap in the water.

Based on a long history of public health and environmental regulation, federal and state rules involving E. coli -- well intentioned but complicated, expensive and frustrating -- have evolved over the last half-century. The upshot for public beaches is that water monitoring samples must be taken on a regular schedule, must be tested for fecal contamination and, if some threshold is exceeded, must be closed until the contamination drops back down below the threshold, after which re-opening occurs.

E. coli concentrations are due to many factors, beginning with how many swimmers entered the water inadequately washed and how many kids in leaky diapers are swimming, plus whatever animal contamination is there, which, in Chicago's case, is mainly from sea gull defecation. Additions also come from polluted water arriving from elsewhere such as sewage leaks and overflows. Warm water and surface runoff make the problem worse.

Last year, to ensure public safety at its 24 public beaches, Chicago had the unpleasant task of closing its beaches 36 times, and issuing 134 advisories. Imagine the frustration. Family outings become family shutdowns, even when the beaches are clean (the samples had a turn-around time of 18 hours). Resentment toward government officials builds. I've been there and done that, having arrived at unexpectedly closed beaches with small kids who don't understand what's going on.

Enter new technology. With a $150,000 grant from the United States Environmental Protection Agency, Chicago built a sophisticated monitoring and reporting system for its beaches. Using high-tech buoys arrayed off each beach, the relevant environmental conditions are monitored continuously: temperatures, sunlight, wave action, currents, water level, rainfall and so forth.

Feeding this information into numerical models, and combining it with both monitored samples and human judgment allows park staff to closely predict the E. coli status of the water in real time. The data and results are then forwarded to the Internet where they can be accessed by logging on or by
text messages. Even better, it's sent to conspicuous signs at 16 of the beaches that report E. coli concentrations and explain their significance.

Reading one of these signs is like putting your toe in the water before deciding to swim or not. Government doesn't tell us when it's too cold or warm to swim. Now it need not tell us when the bacterial count is too high, except in the case of emergency.

I just love this story. Our federal treasury directs funds toward an important city with a demonstrated need. Local government then provides a service, which allows its citizens to decide what to do next.