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Lighthouse available for 'adoption'

By: Grant Welker , Herald News Staff Reporter

FALL RIVER - The Borden Flats Lighthouse is celebrating its 125th birthday this year by going up for adoption.

The lighthouse, which stands off-shore where the Taunton River flows into Mount Hope Bay, is being offered by the U.S. General Services Administration to local, state or federal agencies, non-profits, or historical or preservation societies.

Lighthouses like Borden Flats are offered for availability if the Coast Guard finds them unnecessary for navigational aid, said Jeff Gales, executive director of the United States Lighthouse Society, based in San Francisco.

"It's quite common actually," Gales said. "In earlier days, lighthouses were required to go to the highest bidder. In 2000, the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act was passed, which says that it can't be sold to the highest bidder."

The act says that lighthouses must be transferred to groups that are dedicated and financially able to preserve it, and must be open to the public at certain times. The GSA says Borden Flats must be used for educational, recreational, cultural or historical preservation purposes.

"Sometimes people get together to form, say, the Borden Flats Light Preservation Society," Gales said. "That would be a strong application, or maybe a maritime museum. They typically want it to go to a local group or a historical society."

If no groups are interested, the lighthouse would then be sold to the highest private bidder, which would still need to abide by the preservation act. Gales said it is usually very difficult to find groups to adopt off-shore lighthouses like Borden Flats or many in Chesapeake Bay because of the difficulty in getting to and from the lighthouse. Sometimes lighthouses can be moved, which could be possible for Borden Flats, Gales said.

The Borden Flats Light was commissioned in 1875 and built six years later at a cost of \$24,000 to warn passing ships of underwater jags. It was built with sensors to pick up humidity and fog to activate the foghorn and bell.

It was staffed by a lighthouse keeper around the clock for much of its life. The lighthouse was electrified in 1957 and became fully-automated in 1963. Its light was originally a kerosene lamp, but was updated to a plastic lens in 1977.

Much of the original living quarters have been removed, and only a staircase to the light remains. The 50-foot structure reportedly has been leaning since a hurricane in 1938.

Mayor Edward M. Lambert Jr. said the thought of taking control of the lighthouse, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, hadn't crossed his mind.

"It's always a possibility," he said. "We don't have an immediate use for it, but we're fond of it. It's good that they are being creative with using the lighthouse."

Paula Santangelo of the GSA said this year alone two lighthouses - Hog Island Shoal Light in Portsmouth, R.I., and Goose Rocks Light in Pennobscot, Maine - have been sold. The Portsmouth light received a bid of \$165,000 through an online auction and the Pennobscot light received \$24,500 through a sealed bid process, she said. Last year, Conimicut Light in Warwick, R.I., was conveyed to the town at no cost.

GSA owns, operates and manages more than 340 million square feet of space in 8,000 owned and leased buildings across the country, according to its Web site. It was created to improve government efficiency by acquiring property, as well as supplies and services, on behalf of federal agencies.

Santangelo said she isn't sure if GSA has received any bids yet. The lighthouse is currently owned by the Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Coast Guard. Prospective bidders have until Nov. 20 to express interest. For more information call Paula Santangelo at 617-565-5777.

For more information about lighthouse conservation, visit www.uslhs.org.

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