

Lighthouse transfer nears

City hopes to control historic site next year

By DANIELLE QUISENBERRY
Times Herald

The white surface of the Fort Gratiot Lighthouse in Port Huron is spotted with red bits of brick peeking from behind the paint, signaling the year-old building's deterioration.

Through the years, outer chunks of bricks forming the lighthouse's tapered, vertical exterior have broken off and fallen from the point of the six-building Fort Gratiot Light Station off Omar Street at the southern tip of Lake Huron.

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This week, a team of engineers, historical architects and others have been scurrying to evaluate the condition of the lighthouse, built in 1829, and the buildings surrounding it.

The team is preparing for when the city, after years of effort, gains ownership of the working U.S. Coast Guard station. The city has plans to restore it.

Featured on the city's official seal, the lighthouse is the oldest in Michigan.

The city could have control of the light station as early as next year, but it's been a long process. The museum and the city of Port Huron have been working since about 1997 to secure the station, now owned by the federal government. They began a process to transfer ownership about five years ago.

When the process is complete, the museum will operate the light station as a satellite site.

Similar efforts to secure ownership of lighthouses, key to preserving and marketing the state's extensive maritime history, have been ongoing in Michigan, said historians and lighthouse enthusiasts.

Planning begins

Quinn Evans Architects of Ann Arbor expects to have a draft of a historic-structures report for the light station completed by the end of the year.

The final report, which will serve as a guiding document for restoring the light station, should be done by early next year, said Richard Gaffney, an architectural historian from Algonac.

In addition to the lighthouse, the light station features a 106-year-old fog-signal building, the old U.S. Coast Guard station, built in 1874, a garage, a single residence and an equipment building.

It could cost the city about \$800,000 to restore the buildings, but a more accurate cost estimate will come with the historic-structures report, said Port Huron Museum curator. The city has secured a \$400,000 grant to cover a portion of the cost.

Of the structures, the lighthouse is to be preserved "first and foremost," Gaffney said.

It is most in need of repair, Mills said.

Some of the disrepair has been caused by poor maintenance. The surface of the building has been power washed, not allowed to dry, which allowed moisture in the brick. When the water freezes and expands, the brick pops off in spots, she said.

Fortunately, Gaffney said, tests Thursday gave early indications the damage is not serious.

A destination site

The transfer of ownership and restoration are key to establishing the light station as a tourist destination, said Jennifer Radcliff, a museum board member and vice president of the Michigan Lighthouse Fund, a nonprofit group working to secure money for lighthouse projects.

Radcliff was a founding member of the Michigan Lighthouse Project, which is dedicated to ensuring excess Coast Guard property is transferred to the hands of a viable stewardship group.

Projects, such as the one being done in Port Huron, are happening all over Michigan, said Radcliff, who called the state's historic sites "a treasure trove of jewels."

"From a real current point of view, our maritime offerings are one of the best ways and most valuable ways to create a diverse economy and the lighthouse to lead people to appreciate the whole coast in the state."

She said the goal is to make people look at, value, support and promote lighthouses as a "big part of our state economy."

A statewide effort

In Port Hope, about 70 miles north of Port Huron in Huron County, ownership of the Pointe Aux Barques Lighthouse, built in 1854, is being transferred from the Coast Guard to Huron County.

It is overseen by the Pointe Aux Barques Lighthouse Society and is the only publicly accessible lighthouse along the Lake Huron coast. The Fort Gratiot Light Station.

Since the transfer, the keepers' quarters are being renovated and there are plans to renovate the lighthouse.

In total, the society expects it will cost about \$470,000, which will be paid primarily with state or federal grants, said Judy Valent, executive director of the society's board of directors.

"The lighthouses are the history of this area," she said. "They do reflect what life was like, how hard it was, and the people who lived here."

People come from all over to see lighthouses, Gaffney said.

More than 3,000 people toured the Fort Gratiot lighthouse this summer, even though tours are given by appointment only. The tours are marketed by the museum until the city gains ownership, Gaffney said.

Tourism is important, especially with the state of Michigan's economy, he said.

Kevin TeBeest, who lives in Burton, east of Flint, has traveled with his family several times to Port Huron to see the lighthouse and the museum.

Originally from South Dakota, he finds lighthouses "unique."

He said he has seen 34 lighthouses in Michigan.

When the Fort Gratiot Lighthouse is open for tours, TeBeest said he will "definitely" visit.

"My family and I find lighthouses interesting. The history is interesting," he said.

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