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Mich. lighthouses seen as beacons of heritage

Lawmakers aim for federal funds to aid preservation efforts

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WASHINGTON - The golden age of Michigan's storied lighthouses has passed, but the state's congressional lawmakers have a plan to keep all their lights shining on the shores of the Great Lakes.

A House committee held a hearing this week on a bill backed by a bipartisan group of 10 Michigan representatives that would require the federal government to spend \$500,000 to assess the condition of the state's 124 lighthouses and estimate the cost of preserving them - in the process drawing private donations and tourists.

A Senate committee approved a similar bill, backed by Democratic Sens. Debbie Stabenow and Carl Levin in March.

The National Park Service opposes the legislation, saying its parks in Michigan already preserve the state's most important maritime resources.

But both Stabenow and Rep. Dave Camp, R-Midland, lead sponsors of the bill, hope Congress will approve it this year.

"Lighthouses fuel the economy of many Michigan communities, drawing thousands of tourists each year and creating jobs," Stabenow, of Lansing, said Friday. She came up with the idea for the legislation after visiting small coastal towns.



(Photo by Associated Press file photo)
Rough water: Waves crash over the north break wall Thursday near the Ludington lighthouse. The break wall was recently opened to venturesome pedestrians after being closed for two years for construction.

On the Web:

- Michigan Lighthouse Fund: www.michiganlighthouse.org/aboutus.html
- Michigan Lighthouse Fund interactive map of Michigan lighthouses: www.michiganlighthouse.org/newmap.html

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Lighthouses were no longer essential as a navigation tool after global positioning systems became common beginning in the 1980s. But in Michigan, which has more miles of shoreline and more lighthouses than any other state in the continental United States, many people view lighthouses as an important part of the state's cultural history.

"They are sources of identity for Michigan's lakeshore communities," Kirk Lindquist, president of the Michigan Lighthouse Fund, told the House subcommittee on national parks. His Lansing-based nonprofit raises money for groups that own Michigan lighthouses.

The Coast Guard has been transferring ownership of lighthouses to state and municipal governments and nonprofit groups since the mid-1990s. Before that process began, the Coast Guard spent \$300 million a year to operate the nation's 597 lighthouses, Lindquist said.

Small governments and nonprofits don't have the money to do the repairs that many of the lighthouses need, Lindquist said.

One goal of the Stabenow-Camp bill is to generate enthusiasm among private donors for the preservation effort. The bill also would require the National Park Service to recommend how to link the lighthouses in a way that attracts visitors.

One model would be Michigan's Motor Cities National Heritage Area, which offers tours of the state's automotive plants.

"Heritage tourism is an underdeveloped part of Michigan's economy," said Sandra Clark, director of the Michigan Historical Center.

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