

# Stepping Stones Lighthouse

by Bill Bleyer

Only one application for ownership of the historical Stepping Stones Lighthouse in Long Island Sound has been filed: from the Town of North Hempstead.

The town had been joined by five nonprofit groups, none of them local, in sending a letter of interest to the Federal General Services Administration last summer. But only the town filed an application by the January deadline, said Catherine Turton, an architectural historian with the National Park Service regional office in Philadelphia that is overseeing the process of determining who is qualified to be given the lighthouse.

"We have 60 days to review the application" after the deadline, Turton said. If the town is not rated as qualified, it will have 30 days to remedy any deficiencies. If it can't, the GSA would sell the 1877 lighthouse in an auction in which "anyone can bid on it," she said.

In either case, the GSA includes preservation easements to protect the structure in any deed transfer as specified by the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act 2000, which stipulates that the lighthouses that the Coast Guard no longer wants to maintain can be turned over to other qualifying governments or nonprofits at no cost, according to Meta Cushing, a GSA realty specialist handling the lighthouse. "We also have easements in the deed that allow access for the Coast Guard to maintain the aids to navigation, since Stepping Stones is a working light," she said.

The North Hempstead application was filed by the town and its non-profit Business & Tourism Development Corporation. It says they "are seeking the lighthouse with the goal of restoring and using this property as an educational site for future generations." It adds that "the town is uniquely situated financially, historically, and has the personnel to successfully complete these goals and do what is in the best public interest."

The town not only has an annual budget of nearly \$54 million, the application said, but it "has an excellent history of obtaining and administering grant funds, with \$15,000,000 obtained in the past three years by a professional grant-writer on staff. The town is also a designated Certified Local Grant Community



*Stepping Stones Lighthouse (1877)*

by New York State, allowing the municipality to apply for special Historic Preservation Grants not open to all local governments. The Town has obtained several Historic Preservation Grants for: Development of Town History; Intensive Level Surveys for Significant Buildings; a Landmarks Video; development of a Landmarks Driving Tour; an Educational Symposium on Historic Preservation; and recently, development of a Maritime Museum. The Parks Department currently manages and maintains more than 35 facilities of town-owned properties with over 100 full-time park employees and an annual budget of approximately \$7 million. In addition, the town also maintains a harbor patrol which is responsible for maintaining waterways that surround North Hempstead. The harbor patrol is equipped with three boats and 10 staff who patrol the waters on a regular basis, giving the town easy access to the lighthouse and an ability to provide security. The town's recent role in the preservation of current town-owned historic properties include Town Hall, Cornell/Van Nostrand House, and Landmark school building in Port Washington. In addition, the town has considerable experience in getting private donors for many projects and programs that it currently runs. Therefore, the Town is fully equipped to undertake the financial and historic preservation responsibilities associated with this project."

The application said the town had contacted

lighthouse architect Walter Sedovic of Walter Sedovic Associates, who outlined a five-to-ten-year restoration costing roughly \$3.4 million.

If the town does get the lighthouse, it would partner with the Great Neck Park District to immediately begin on-shore educational programs and set up an informational kiosk and binocular viewer at Stepping Stone Park. After restoration, tours of the interior would be scheduled.

This application packet included endorsements of the town's bid from a number of organizations and officials including the Science Museum of Long Island, which would conduct educational programs involving the lighthouse.

When told the town was the only applicant, Leslie Gross, executive director of town development corporation, said "Quite frankly, I'm surprised because there was quite a lot of interest and I thought some of the nonprofits would follow through and apply" because they had gone out with her and other North Hempstead officials to see the lighthouse on a tour with federal personnel.

As for what lies ahead, if the town gets the offshore structure, "It needs a lot of work," she said. "It's a challenge but we will rise to the occasion. We have a lot to learn because we have never taken care of a lighthouse. But we have a lot of partners and advice from people who have had experience with lighthouses and we'll take our time and do it correctly. We also have a lot of experience" with historic buildings. "That's why I think we were really the most well-suited to take on the responsibility."

While the restoration was underway, Gross said the town would try to work with a water taxi company that would take visitors out to circle the structure and provide background information. "A lot of people don't even know the lighthouse exists," she said, so the town will have to publicize the attraction to attract visitors and volunteers if it gains control.

The private groups that had initially expressed interest were the Asian Americans for Equality of New York City, Beacon Preservation Inc. of Ansonia, CT., Crabber Cup of Greenwich, CT; Historic Preservation Society of America of Washington DC and the Korstad Marine Preservation Society of North Plains, OR.



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