

The Nantucket Lightship

by Bill Bleyer



After being docked “temporarily” in Oyster Bay for almost five years, the historic Nantucket Lightship might remain there permanently. The Town of Oyster Bay is moving to adopt the 71 year-old vessel after its current owner, the fledgling National Lighthouse Museum on Staten Island, decided it should give up the ship because of delays in opening its planned facility.

“We know that even in the best case scenario it’s going to be a couple of years or more before there is a museum there and we don’t feel it’s responsible to leave the boat in limbo during that time,” said Jerry Roberts, a museum board member and former executive director. “We felt it was time to reach out and make sure we can get the ship into the right hands.” That would be the town, says Oyster Bay Supervisor John Venditto.

So Roberts, a member of the museum board’s executive committee, said it has agreed already to pursue the Oyster Bay offer. “We need to step up” to avoid having the lightship scrapped or become a liability, Venditto said. “I have instructed the town attorney and the parks department to take whatever steps are necessary to acquire title. I would like the town to control any future happenings with the vessel.”

Venditto said the red, 150-foot ship built in 1936 would remain at the town-owned pier man-

aged by the nonprofit Waterfront Center where it has been visiting, or squatting, depending on whom you ask, since the museum first brought it to an oyster festival and left it for restoration work that has sputtered to a halt.

The town would organize a new restoration effort and find a use for the floating lighthouse, such as a marine education center, Venditto said.

He said the lightship could play a key role in the development of Oyster Bay hamlet as a center for historical tourism along with a planned Theodore Roosevelt museum, Oyster Bay Railroad Museum in the old depot and other existing historical sites nearby. “It’s just a nice fit,” he said. “There is a tremendous amount of value in studying our history.”

The fact that the ship remained at the Waterfront Center on an unofficial, temporary basis with only sporadic restoration efforts taking place angered some state officials, especially Sen. Carl Marcellino (R-Syosset), who helped to get the waterfront land for the town and wanted the interloper evicted.

Venditto has defended the ship’s presence and said he might be interested in acquiring the *Nantucket* in January, 2007, when Roberts said delays in opening the Staten Island facility might necessitate finding a new owner for the ship. He

tried in vain to interest the organizers of a planned Coast Guard museum in New London, Connecticut and waterfront developers and nonprofit groups in Boston, where the ship had once been based.

Roberts, now the executive director of the Connecticut River Museum in Essex, said of the Staten Island site, “We’ve been in multi-year negotiations with the city and it’s just taken a long time for a lot of reasons - fundraising, city bureaucracy, city politics and 9/11. It’s still very much in play; a developer has been named for the site. Our board will be entering into negotiations with the city and the developer about the specifics of the project.”

He added that volunteer efforts to restore the lightship have dried up in the past year. “We have a couple of volunteers who visit the ship to make sure she is still floating properly and not in any danger,” he said. “It was very hard to get volunteers when it was in limbo. We want to make sure that the ship, which is a national landmark, has a good home,” Roberts said. “We’re delighted that Oyster Bay might be interested in keeping the vessel there while still allowing some participation from the lighthouse museum and that it could potentially visit the museum when it is open. Ideally, the ship should be main-

Continued on page 7



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