$640,000 awarded to BI for its lighthouses

By Read Kingsbury

The hopes and plans of Block Island residents for extending the lives of their historic lighthouses received a big boost last week when William D. Ankner, director of the state Department of Transportation, announced grants for both of them: $400,000 for the North Light and $240,000 for the Southeast Light.

The grant for the 1867 North Light will be used to remove and restore the drum that holds the light and the deteriorating structure beneath it. The grant for the 1874 Southeast Lighthouse will be used to restore cast iron elements of the tower and make the grounds attractive once the building is brought up to date.

The money comes from the federal Transportation Enhancement Program (TEP), which directs a portion of federal highway funds to support community projects that enhance the experience of travel. The funds move through state transportation agencies.

The Southeast Light had previously received a TEP grant; the town has used other TEP grants to purchase historic and conservation easements over the Spring House and to replace the Rebecca statue, the completion of which Ankner came to the island last Friday to celebrate (see story, Page 11).

North Light plans

"Everybody is in a state of shock that we got what we asked for," Chairman Gil Plumb remarked when the North Light Commission met Monday afternoon, June 10.

Excited and relieved that the commission now has funds to tackle its most pressing needs, the commission moved quickly to lay out a schedule. "The first step is to notify the Coast Guard and have the lens removed," said Rob Gilpin,

vice chairman. With that done, contractors will be able to see better the extent of the work to be done, he explained.

Chief Petty Officer Sean Walsh of the Coast Guard Aids to Navigation team in Bristol said he had not received notification about the North Light, but he expected the light and the solar panels on the roof would be removed and a light of less intensity, powered by a couple of solar panels, would be mounted on a mast farther out on Sandy Point while the lighthouse repairs are underway.

Gilpin said he hopes the town will be ready to seek bids in time for the work to be done during the fall and winter, "although that may be wishful thinking."

The plan, Gilpin and Plumb have explained, is to have a crane lift the drum off, then send it to a metal shop on the mainland for repair. Then the remaining metal parts will be cleaned and painted. A cracked plate and two structural I-beams will be repaired or replaced, and missing ornamental iron will be fabricated.

The lighthouse was abandoned in 1973 and the light was mounted on a metal tower farther out on Sandy Point. When the town obtained custody of the North Light in 1975, the first task was to make the granite structure weather-tight. The wrought iron drum housing the light was sandblasted and painted but not fully evaluated.

The light was restored to the tower in 1989 and the first floor opened as a maritime interpretive center in 1993. A heating system has been installed, and installation of both a small windmill and a solar panel array are planned to provide power.

When the commission turned close attention to the upper floors, it realized a number of weaknesses, beginning with the condition of the drum and the structural members beneath it. An engineering survey was undertaken during the winter, repair plans developed and the grant application filed.

Each year more than 40,000 people trek a half-mile through the sand to visit the lighthouse, the application noted.

Southeast Lighthouse plans

For the Southeast Lighthouse Foundation, the new TEP grant will allow the rehabilitation of the building, moved

back from the edge of the bluff in 1993, to move into its final stages. The foundation plans to seek bids soon, probably in July, for replacing the roof, redoing the granite copings, replacing windows, re-pointing the brickwork and generally making the old building watertight and useable once again, said Lisa Nolan, the foundation's administrative director.

Once that work is completed, up-to-date mechanical systems will be installed, and the interior will be remodeled. The Foundation has $475,000 from the first TEP grant plus $300 000 from a National Park Service's "Save America's Treasures" grant, which it will have to match with a fundraising effort.

The Foundation applied for the new TEP grant, Nolan said, to complete restoration of elements of the cast iron tower, to install a wheelchair lift, to landscape the grounds and build a historically correct picket fence, and install signage. "It'll be a little while until we reach that work, but this will enable us to complete the project in a nice fashion," she said.

Historical Society keeps looking

Meanwhile, the Block Island Historical Society, disappointed in its application for TEP funds to help build a shed for its double-ender boat and several other historic vehicles, will look elsewhere for funding, said Maggie Murphy, administrator.

The Historical Society had projected the cost of a building at more than $98,000 and had asked for $80,000.

One of the exhibits, the double-ender fishing vessel Leona A., is currently outdoors on the front lawn of the museum, in dire need of restoration and protection. Scattered around the island in private sheds and outbuildings are a 1900 farm cart, a Lyle cart from one of the island's lifesaving stations, a surrey of the 1890s, and a small skiff used by the North Light keeper to cross Sachem Pond before the state road was build around the pond.

Except for the Leona A, none of these vehicles have been on display. The Historical Society wants to have a building on the museum grounds in which they would be protected and exhibited.