North Light Commission set to propose regulations

By Emily Lindquist



The North Light in the snow. Photo by Olya Evanitsky

The recipients of the 2004 Block Island Bayberry Wreath Award, Robbie Gilpin and Gil Plumb, were congratulated by the North Light Commission at its first meeting of the year on Monday, Jan. 10.

Modestly accepting the praise, the two were quick to get back to business.

Gilpin had hoped to vote on and send the commission's proposed regulations to the Town Council for approval. But there wasn't a quorum, so the proposal will have to wait until next month.

The regulations have been discussed at length; the commission believes that if passed, they could help preserve the land surrounding the lighthouse, and make the area safer. Proposed regulations include limiting unauthorized vehicle access to the beach between the visiting hours of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. during the summer season (July 1 to Sept. 15); prohibiting swimming at the northern tip of the island because of the rip tides; requiring that dogs are leashed; and prohibiting fires on the beaches.

One of the commission's biggest concerns is keeping people away from areas already roped off, including the dunes where the beach grass is threatened.

While much of the land around the North Light is U.S. Fish & Wildlife property, other areas are town-owned. Mike Lapisky, acting chief of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in Rhode Island, clarified that the town can have domain and enact ordinances only on town property.

The question remains that if the Town Council approves the regulations and creates a town ordinance, how would the new policies be enforced?

In the past there has been a conservation officer patrolling the beaches; however, last year the town didn't employ one and it isn't clear that there will be one this year. The commission understands that during the summer months the Police Department is extremely busy and doesn't have enough personnel to enforce the regulations.

Talk of putting a chain with a combination lock at the entrance to the beach was suggested. It could be unlocked after 5 p.m., allowing fishermen access to the fishing spot. "It's a touchy thing to enforce," Gilpin said, but added that if they can help the new Town Council recognize the area as a wildlife refuge, the changes may come more quickly. "We should strongly request that the town hire a conservation officer this year," he said.

Windmill weather station discussed

An extension to the windmill that provides an alternative energy source for the lighthouse is on order and will be installed soon.

Approached by a company that installs weather stations, the commission discussed installing a weather station on top of the windmill.

The company, WeatherFlow, installs solar-powered weather stations for the U.S. Coast Guard Search and Rescue operations. The company uses the data collected to improve the accuracy of its weather models, as well as to keep a running record of the data so that at any time it can predict the location of a craft drifting for up to six hours.

If installed, the North Light data would be available online so that conditions could be monitored from any location. The monitoring of the winds from anywhere in the world could alert of abnormal or dangerous conditions. The commission was interested in talking to the company further, but agreed that it may not be an attractive candidate because if winds reach more than 120 mph the windmill would be taken down. Either way, the weather station would be cost-free and maintained and installed by the company.

North Light video

After talking to a state representative, plans to make the North Light more handicap-accessible are underway. Currently, if someone is physically impaired and can't make the walk out to the lighthouse, arrangements can be made to drive them to the location. There are ramps attached to the building that provide easy wheelchair access into the structure.

Taking the experience one step further, the state suggested making a short video showcasing the lighthouse, which people could watch in lieu of visiting the actual site. Gilpin is excited about the idea and said he wants to incorporate students from the B.I. School to produce, shoot and write the script. Further discussion on the idea is on next month's agenda.