Biddeford group hopes to keep a restored lighthouse shining bright

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With an extensive restoration project nearing completion, the volunteers who care for Wood Island Lighthouse are turning their focus to the future of the property just off the Biddeford coast.

The Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse organization is seeking a zoning change that would allow for the installation of a septic system and possibly allow a keeper to live at the lighthouse during the summer. Future plans for the lighthouse also include hosting educational programs and possibly allowing overnight stays for small groups of people.

The Biddeford Planning Board will hold a public hearing Wednesday on a request for a contract zone that would allow the nonprofit organization to install the septic system and outline restrictions on future use of the island.

“We have been focused for the past 13 years on saving the lighthouse and preserving it. We’re nearing the end of that restoration process,” said Brad Coupe, chairman of the Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse executive committee. “It’s a time when we have to think about what we’re going to do in the future.”

A keeper last lived at the lighthouse in 1986. In recent years, the island has been a popular destination for kayakers and visitors who take tours put on by Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse.

Coupe said the idea of having a summer keeper at the lighthouse has grabbed people’s attention, but volunteers with the nonprofit Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse are more focused on finishing the interior renovations by midsummer and – if the City Council approves – installing a septic system to replace the defunct overboard discharge system that had previously been used. The exterior renovation of the lighthouse and keeper’s house has already been completed.

City Manager James Bennett said representatives of the nonprofit Wood Island group approached city officials about the work they’re doing there and the challenges they face with the septic system. He said the staff recommendation is to approve a contract zone that would allow that work without making changes to the shoreland zoning along the rest of the city’s coastline. The City Council expressed interest in the concept of the contract zone and referred the issue to the Planning Board to work out the details, Bennett said.

After the public hearing, the Planning Board will develop recommendations for the contract zone that will include protections to make sure overnight stays on the island don’t turn the place into a “quasi-hotel,” Bennett said.

The contract zone would need final approval from the City Council.

Wood Island Lighthouse has been part of Maine maritime history for more than 200 years. The U.S. government bought 8 acres at the eastern end of the island in 1806 to build a lighthouse to guide mariners into Winter Harbor and to the Saco River. President Thomas Jefferson commissioned the lighthouse in 1808. The first keeper’s house on the island was built in 1857 and 1858. The current keeper’s house was remodeled in 1906 to include a gambrel roof and columned open porch.

The all-volunteer Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse has been raising money since 2003 to preserve and restore the lighthouse and keeper’s house. All work at Wood Island is done using National Park Service restoration guidelines as administered by the Maine State Historic Preservation Commission and the Coast Guard.

Last year, Judith Klement, a Georgia resident who spent summers in Saco, donated $50,000 to help pay for the $218,000 restoration of the keeper's house. Coupe said crews have been working on interior renovations and expect to wrap up that work by July. Volunteers have been researching the type of furniture that likely would have been in the keeper's house in 1906 so the house can be decorated as it would have looked originally.

Coupe said fundraising for the upkeep of the property will continue this summer with tours of the island.

In July and August, volunteers bring visitors to the island, where they can tour the keeper's house and climb the winding stone staircase to the top of the tower. Inside the keeper's house, visitors can learn about former keepers and their families, as well as the island's dramatic and tragic history. In 1896, a man named Howard Hobbs shot and killed Frederick Milliken, who lived on the island with is family. Hobbs then shot himself. Many people now believe that ghosts roam Wood Island.

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