

Bass Harbor Head Lighthouse ISLANDER FILE PHOTO

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Park still pondering future of lighthouse

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ACADIA NAT'L PARK — Park officials are still considering possible uses for the Bass Harbor Head Lighthouse — and how to pay for its upkeep — once ownership is transferred from the U.S. Coast Guard, which is expected to occur later this year.

"We continue to be interested in exploring options that would generate revenue so we don't have a big bill," Superintendent Kevin Schneider told the Acadia Advisory Commission last week. "We are very cognizant that lighthouses are expensive.

"We also recognize the lighthouse is a really important cultural and historic icon for Acadia National Park, and it's important to preserve it."

Schneider said the most lucrative option might be to use the lightkeeper's house as a vacation rental property. Until a couple of years ago, it was the residence of the commander of the Coast Guard station in Southwest Harbor.

Another possibility, Schneider said, would be for Eastern National, which operates the bookstore at the Hulls Cove Visitor Center, to do something similar at the lighthouse.

"They could maybe even offer a lighthouse tour for a fee," Schneider said.

Eastern National is a nonprofit association that operates museum shops and bookstores at a number of national parks and donates the proceeds to the parks.

"They run other lighthouses within the national park system in the Northeast region quite successfully," Schneider said.

But he emphasized that no decision has been made about the future of the Bass Harbor Head Lighthouse. That decision may well be influenced by the size of the parking lot at the lighthouse, which can accommodate only about 22 vehicles at a time.

"We're concerned about anything that may hold people longer at that site because the parking lot already becomes overwhelmed in the summer," Schneider said. "Could we have some kind of shuttle to bring people to the site? Could we have that parking lot just be for handicap-accessible parking and have a bus drop-off at that location?"

Advisory commission member Ben Emory suggested an endowment could be established to provide for the upkeep of the lighthouse property in perpetuity.

"When you look at the value of the yachts that go by Bass Harbor Head every day in July and August and even longer … I think it's a conversation that could be had with the nonprofits, either here on MDI or lighthouse interests elsewhere," he told Schneider.

"I think a campaign could be doable … and it might take a lot of burden off you," Emory continued. "If [lighthouse maintenance] starts detracting from your ability to do other necessary work within the park when you're on a tight budget, that is a problem."

Schneider said park officials would love to have an endowment for the lighthouse and have considered the possibility of partnerships with outside groups.

The Bass Harbor Head Lighthouse, one of the most popular visitor destinations in Acadia, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Under the ownership transfer agreement, which has not yet been finalized, the Coast Guard would continue to operate and maintain the light itself as an aid to navigation. The light tower, lightkeeper's house and its 2.5 acres of land would go to the park. That property is already surrounded by the park.

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