

The U.S. Coast Guard plans to transfer ownership of the Bass Harbor Head Lighthouse to the National Park Service. Acadia National Park officials say the park's acceptance of the lighthouse is not contingent on raising funds for renovation or upkeep. ISLANDER PHOTO BY SARAH HINCKLEY

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Lighthouse deal is on slow track Funding needed for upkeep

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ACADIA NAT'L PARK — It could be sometime next year or even longer before the U.S. Coast Guard transfers ownership of the Bass Harbor Head Lighthouse to the National Park Service.

But Acadia remains committed to taking possession of the lighthouse whenever the Coast Guard completes its internal property conveyance process, according to Christie Anastasia, the park's public affairs specialist.

"It's not a done deal, but our full intention is to accept the conveyance of the lighthouse to the park service," she said.

"I've been in these situations before, and something can percolate up and derail the process. But we don't have anything on the radar that indicates that in any way. The process is moving along. But it's not our process; it's the Coast Guard's process."

A Coast Guard spokesman did not respond to requests for comment by the deadline for this issue.

Acadia won't have to pay anything to acquire the lighthouse, the light keeper's house and 2.5 acres of land; it will be a cost-free transfer from the Coast Guard. But funds will be needed to maintain the property.

Earlier this month, when Friends of Acadia sent out invitations to its annual benefit auction in August, it included a card with the heading: "Help Bass Harbor Head Light become Part of Acadia." The card states that Acadia "has the opportunity to acquire the Bass Harbor Head Light and surrounding 2.5 acres, but it will require help from those of us in the community … .

"In order for the park to assume responsibility in the coming year, it will need funding to conduct building and site assessments to determine the condition of the property and to begin the work to restore and repurpose the buildings and grounds."

David MacDonald, president and CEO of Friends of Acadia, said Tuesday, "We're raising some seed money to allow them to jump on the opportunity in an expedited way.

"At our benefit auction, we always pick a special project," he said, "and raise what we hope is some significant money that then can be used to raise and match federal funding."

MacDonald said the lighthouse will be the special project for which money is raised at this year's auction.

Last September, shortly before the park decided to accept the offer of the lighthouse, Acadia Advisory Commission member Dexter Lee cautioned park Superintendent Kevin Schneider that he would be "inheriting a maintenance nightmare."

The park does not currently have money in its budget for upkeep of the lighthouse property. However, Anastasia said the park's acceptance of the lighthouse was not contingent on having the money in hand. She said the park simply couldn't pass up "a once in a lifetime deal."

If the park had decided not to take possession of the lighthouse, the U.S. General Services Administration could have sold it at auction.

Acadia Advisory Commission member Ben Emory suggested at the group's meeting in March that an endowment could be established to provide for the upkeep of the lighthouse property in perpetuity. Schneider responded that park officials would like to have such an endowment and have considered the possibility of partnerships with outside groups.

MacDonald said such an endowment "is not something Friends of Acadia is ready to take on at this point."

Schneider told the Advisory Commission that park officials also were exploring options for using the lighthouse property that would generate revenue for its upkeep.

"We are very cognizant that lighthouses are expensive," he said.

Schneider said the most lucrative option might be to use the light keeper's house for vacation rentals. 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, the nonprofit association that 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," he said.

MacDonald said Friends of Acadia supports the idea of using the lighthouse in a way that generates revenue.

"But we hope those models would not preclude opportunities for public access and public enjoyment," he said.

The lighthouse was built in 1858 atop a cliff at the southernmost tip of Mount Desert Island. A tower and fog bell were added in 1876. The lighthouse was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1988.

The lighthouse is one of the most photographed places on Mount Desert Island. Surrounded by park property, it is a widely recognized symbol of Acadia, even though it has never been part of the park.

Once the transfer of ownership occurs, the Coast Guard will continue to maintain the light in the lighthouse as an aid to navigation.