Friends of Portsmouth Harbor Lighthouses
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A Chapter of the American Lighthouse Foundation

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Chair Millet, Chair Kornfield, and honorable members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

I am Jeremy D'Entremont, representing the American Lighthouse Foundation and its chapter Friends of Portsmouth Harbor Lighthouses. I am here today to testify in favor of LD 135 "An Act To Appropriate Funds To Provide Sea Protection and Public Access to the Historic Whaleback Lighthouse in Kittery."

Wave-swept lighthouses are perched on exposed rocks and ledges and are subject to the full fury of the mighty ocean. Wave-swept lighthouses in the United States can trace their beginnings to the original (1830) stone tower on Whaleback Ledge, at the mouth of the Piscataqua River in Kittery, Maine. That tower has been cited as the first successful wave-swept lighthouse in the United States. The second Whaleback Lighthouse, built in 1872 and still standing, is a familiar icon of the southern Maine coastal region, a few hundred feet offshore from Fort Foster in Kittery.

The era of resident keepers at wave-swept lighthouses ended decades ago as the last stations were automated. Today, a new breed of keeper—the preservationists, including nonprofit organizations like the American Lighthouse Foundation—work to maintain these historic monuments. Modern-day preservationists face many of the same daunting challenges that were bravely met by the designers, builders, and keepers of the past.

Lighthouses are among the most visited and beloved landmarks on the coasts of the United States, and that is especially true in the state of Maine, which is blessed with 66 historic lighthouses. Several of those are under the stewardship of the American Lighthouse Foundation. Maine Open Lighthouse Day, an annual event in September that is co-sponsored by the American Lighthouse Foundation, draws more than 15,000 people who want to experience the rare opportunity to climb lighthouses that are rarely opened to the public.

That brings to me to the reason we are here. When the American Lighthouse Foundation took ownership of Whaleback Lighthouse in 2009, the boat landing facilities that were once used by keepers were long gone, destroyed by the Coast Guard in 1969 when a fog signal tower was removed. We were presented with a situation where volunteers, contractors, or anyone needing to access the lighthouse has had to disembark from a small boat onto jagged, slippery rocks, then clamber over uneven rocks to reach the lighthouse. We have been able to complete some restoration projects, but our progress has been hindered by this inadequate and dangerous situation. Major restoration projects and safe public access cannot happen until we have a more secure landing facility.

The docking system that has been designed by award-winning engineer Duncan Mellor will enable us to move forward with the next stages of restoration. And, just as importantly, it will enable us to bring the public to Whaleback Lighthouse to experience a wave-swept lighthouse first hand.

There are no other similar wave-swept lighthouses in the U.S. that offer tours via boat access—this will be an exciting and unique experience for local residents, schoolchildren, and tourists from around the world. Along with the newly restored Wood Island Lifesaving Station, just a few hundred feet from Whaleback Ledge, this will make the mouth of the Piscataqua River a destination for maritime scenery and history that will be second to none.

