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Historic lighthouse gets $500K restoration grant

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Contributed photo from Hudson-Athens Lighthouse Preservation Society A flock of geese swim by the Hudson-Athens Lighthouse.

The Hudson-Athens Lighthouse Preservation Society received a $500,000 grant from the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation to help restore the aging landmark.

The grant will go toward refurbishing the roof and gutters of the 147-year-old Hudson-Athens Lighthouse as a way to stop ongoing water intrusion and erosion. The money will help complete the first of a four-phase restoration project estimated to cost between $3 million and $4 million.

Built in 1874, the lighthouse stands in the Hudson River between Hudson and Athens as a way to alert boats of shallow waters, in an area of the river known as Middle Ground Flats. Nearly 150 years of currents, weather dredging and wakes from large ships have deteriorated the historic lighthouse and the nearly 200-year-old underwater wooden pilings that support its structure.

“This grant does not give us our 100-year solution, but it’s a start,” Society Vice-president Bob Green said. The state parks funds are covering exterior renovations such as a new staircase from the dock to the deck of the lighthouse, a new marine toilet and cistern repairs. However, the Society needs to raise funds to repair the underwater wood pilings, a much more costly renovation. A 2007-08 state parks grant offered the Society a temporary solution by providing enough money to restore only certain pilings.

“The OPRHP grant makes it easier for HALPS to fundraise from federal and state money. And once that happens, it’s easier to get private donations to finish the project,” said Green, who lives in Stuyvesant and whose background is in finance consultancy. A recently finished engineering assessment concluded that without the necessary repairs, the Hudson-Athens Lighthouse will not survive.

Van Calhoun, chairman of the Hudson-Athens Lighthouse Restoration Committee and a self-taught architect, estimates that the entire restoration project will be finished by the end of 2024. “We need to complete the 100-year fix,” he said. “If we don’t do anything in 10 to 15 years, it won’t be safe for people to go there anymore and the U.S. Coast Guard will put a metal pole with a light in its place.”

Calhoun believes most of the foundational wood pilings that hold the lighthouse above water are in good shape because they are covered in river mud which prevents the water from oxidizing the wood.

“It’s not sinking, it’s moving,” he said.

Calhoun also predicts that it will take at least nine months for construction work to begin on the above-water piece of the renovation project. And, by the end of 2024, a steel curtain wall will likely surround the lighthouse slightly above the projected high water level.

The lighthouse will sit atop its powerful stone block structure, but the underwater steel curtain wall will surround the wood pilings and be strong enough to withstand high tide under a full moon 50 years from now, Calhoun said.

Data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration suggests that high tide in 50 years could be 3 to 4 feet higher than current levels. If the Society meets its funding goals for a full restoration of the lighthouse, it will be able to tolerate weather erosion and river currents for more time before needing further renovations.

Today, a green light on top of the lighthouse monitored by the U.S. Coast Guard and powered by solar panels blinks every 8 seconds as a way to alert passing ships of shallow land. In 1949, maintenance of the lighthouse slowed down when the need for an onsite lightkeeper became redundant due to the installation

of the automatic light.

Then, in 1982, concerned citizens created the Hudson-Athens Lighthouse Preservation Society as an effort to save the structure. The lighthouse is on both the National and New York State Register of Historic Places.

For those interested in assuring the survival of the Hudson-Athens Lighthouse, the Society invites interested citizens to contact them at lighthouse@hudsonathenslighthouse.org.