Future looks brighter for Manchac lighthouse

By BOB ANDERSON
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The Pass Manchac lighthouse's beacon may soon shine again.

More important, preservationists say, the tilting lighthouse won't topple into the pounding waves of Lake Pontchartrain.

The U.S. Coast Guard finally has given title of the storied lighthouse to the state, paving the way for the work needed to preserve it, Ben Taylor said Tuesday.

For more than five years Taylor, a Hammond businessman, spearheaded a movement to save the lighthouse, which weathered a Civil War battle but eventually was undermined by coastal erosion.

After an article in The Advocate about the threatened lighthouse caught the attention of people in the Governor's Office, things began to happen, Taylor said Tuesday.

His greatest fear then became that the federal bureaucracy would move too slowly to transfer the title to the state so that work would begin.

The lighthouse is already leaning more than 7 degrees off center and the tilt is rapidly becoming more perceptible, Taylor said.

While he was in office, former Rep. Bob Livingston won passage of a bill allowing the federal government to donate the lighthouse to the state. Later, when the actual title transfer process seemed to grind to a halt, U.S. Sen. John Breaux, D-Crowley, and U.S. Rep. David Vitter, R-Metairie, made the final push, Taylor said.

An engineer will put a test piling down in about a month and then begin work on restoring the lighthouse's wooden foundation, Taylor said.

The state has approved $230,000 for restoration of the historic site.

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The state is the new owner of this lighthouse built by the federal government in 1837 on Pass Manchac. The state plans to spend more than $200,000 shoring up and restoring the lighthouse, undermined by years of erosion blamed on subsidence, waves and tidal action.

Lighthouse

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The Manchac Lighthouse Committee has gathered $16,000 in donations that it will use to maintain the lighthouse, if that money isn't needed for the restoration, Taylor said.

Among other things, the group plans to put a solar-powered beacon in the lighthouse.

So the structure again may serve as a navigational aid for commercial and recreational users of the waterway.

The federal government built the lighthouse in 1837 to mark the entrance to Pass Manchac, which is some 15 miles south of Hammond and links lakes Maurepas and Pontchartrain.

Several times the structure had to undergo major repairs or rebuilding, including major work in 1867 after Union and Confederate gunboats alternately shelled the lighthouse when it changed hands. A 1943 aerial photograph shows the lighthouse still on shore, but by 1954 erosion had left it sitting on an island, said Bob Hastings of Southeastern Louisiana University.

Further erosion has left it in open water with the wooden foundation exposed during low tides, he said.

In 1987, the Coast Guard decommissioned the facility, which is on the list of National Historic Places and has been the subject of numerous paintings and photographs.