Group hopes to rescue Pass Manchac lighthouse

By BOB ANDERSON
Florida parishes bureau

Pass Manchac's old, leaning lighthouse inched closer to restoration after federal officials donated it to the state, said the group that hopes to finance the restoration.

Donation of the landmark was part of the massive federal budget bill approved recently by Congress, said Ron Taylor, president of the Manchac Lighthouse Committee.

The committee plans to raise the money needed to jack up the structure and repair the foundation. The foundation, undercut by erosion and subsidence, has caused the lighthouse to tilt and eventually allow it to crumble, as the lighthouse keeper's house next to it already has done.

On the list of national historic places, the often-painted and photographed lighthouse is one of the most historical sites in the area, Taylor said.

"I can't stand to see it lost," he said.

The U.S. Coast Guard, which decommissioned the lighthouse in 1987, would not allow the private group to do any work on the site, but the state is willing to let the citizens move ahead with their restoration proposal, Taylor said.

"We are making this a top priority," said Clay Carter of the State Lands Office. "We're afraid if we don't act immediately, we're going to lose it."

The state's plan is to lease the lighthouse at no cost to the private group, which will then take on its refurbishment, Carter said.

The committee has raised some money, but really needs to get a corporate or governmental partner to help come up with the kind of funds needed.

The committee estimates it will cost between $150,000 and $250,000 to jack up the lighthouse and replace its failing foundation.

It will not be the first time the lighthouse, built in 1837, has undergone reconstruction or major refurbishment.

The last extensive repairs were made as a result of shelling during the Civil War, after which the lighthouse required a new tower from the watch room deck upward.

Since then, erosion has eaten away the land around it.

The next major hurricane could topple the structure, Taylor said.

Even if that does not happen, it probably will fall within a decade unless something is done, he said.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1B

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