

# Coast Guard denies opposing affordable housing at Beavertail

By Sam Bari

Citizens concerned about the use of the Beavertail Lighthouse as a suitable dwelling for families are checking out the process by which the U.S. Coast Guard transfers property to organizations and communities, particularly as it pertains to possible environmental cleanup issues.

In a note from Varoujan Karentz, chairman of the Beavertail Lighthouse Site Acquisition Committee, he said that the U.S. Government is "holding up releases of light house properties as excess properties because the United States Coast Guard (USCG) is embattled from within as to how to handle the environmental cleanup issue." The Beavertail Lighthouse is one of those properties.

The note added that, "The most serious concern is lead in the soil particularly with old buildings where lead paint has been used for many years."

Karentz went on to say that, "The irony of this issue is that the Town of Jamestown is planning to place a family with four children in custodial residence on a site which the USCG will not release to the General Services Administration and hence to the National Park Service for public use because of hazardous health contaminants."

USCG Beavertail Light Station property license administrator George E. Bockstael at the Civil Engineering Unit in Providence was contacted concerning the matter.

The USCG standards for "transferring property are extremely high, and much higher than those of the EPA," Bockstael said. He also said that he was not aware of the Coast Guard having a defined standard for contamination levels when licensing or leasing property, but his understanding was that Coast Guard attorneys were looking into the matter. In addition, Bockstael said that although the Coast Guard is always concerned with safety, they are primarily responsible for the facility being maintained by the licensed managing authority according to the licensing agreement. Who the licensee leases the property to, and how it is regulated and managed is determined by the governing authority in those areas, he said.

Town Administrator Bruce Keiser said that he had consulted

with the town solicitor concerning the matter. The Environmental Protection Agency, the state Department of Environmental Management, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development are all being contacted to determine the ruling authority and their standards concerning contamination, Keiser said. The town is also conducting independent tests of the soil and the interior of the building to determine the degree, if any, of contamination, he added.

The town administrator said that the town had no intention of allowing a sub-standard property to be leased to anyone. Although the town explores every opportunity to offer affordable housing to those in need, it is not going to put lives in jeopardy, Keiser said. "Safety, is the first consideration," he said. "If it is determined that the property has contamination issues, we will take measures to see that they are appropriately addressed," he added.

Karentz said: "I don't have a position on this issue other than what I think is best for the preservation of this 150-year-old historic structure. Any consideration for occupancy of the residence should be made in the interest of protecting the property."

"It should be the only priority," he added.

"Cycling families through the residence does not contribute toward its (the lighthouse's) preservation nor does the town's rating system for a resident candidate address that need," Karentz said.

"The issues of contractual interpretation of the present license and how the premises should be used is outside my realm. My earlier discussions with USCG personnel on use of the residence for 'affordable housing' had all resulted in a firm negative attitude," he noted.

"It now appears there is a difference of opinion and policy within its own agency regarding the property being environmentally safe for occupancy by children," Karentz said.

"I suggest you talk to the USCG 'Historic Resources Program Manager' in Washington who is the administrator for 'excessing' lighthouses and was my specific source," he said.

According to Kebby Kelley, the Coast Guard's historic resource

program manager, the Coast Guard's attorneys are looking into the matter and no decision has yet been made on the Coast Guard's position on levels of contamination for licensed properties. "Historical sites like Beavertail are the property of the citizens of this country. Our job and first consideration at all times is that these facilities are safe for those who visit them as well as those who maintain them,"

Kelly said.

She went on to say that it appeared to her that different agendas were in question concerning the Beavertail Lighthouse property. She said that it is not the Coast Guard's position to determine how the facility is managed beyond the licensing agreement. If Jamestown wants to use it for affordable housing and the tenants adhere to the maintenance schedule, then the

Coast Guard is satisfied, she noted. "Although we will do everything within our power to assure that safety issues are addressed, the Coast Guard is not the governing body for the habitation standards of rental properties," Kelly said. "We have no dog in this fight. When our attorneys give us answers on the contamination issue, we will take whatever action is appropriate at that time," she added.

## Renovations for temporary animal shelter to begin soon

By Michaela Kennedy

Friends of the Jamestown Animal Shelter Construction Project will start renovations on Saturday, Jan. 27, at the former recreation garage at 44 Southwest Ave., behind the Town Offices. Volunteers with various areas of construction expertise are invited to help make the project a success.

Town Councilwoman Barbara Szepatowski, leader of the operation, met with a sparse turnout at a kick-off meeting for volunteers held at the library on Jan. 18. "This is a show-and-tell project," Szepatowski said, explaining that having a site with an active rescue operation will prove that a shelter is needed on the island. "Come May, we'll have anywhere from 20 to 30 abandoned kittens," she added.

A site inspection took place on Friday, Jan. 19, by a state veterinarian, and plans for the beautification campaign should be finalized by Friday, Jan. 26. Renovation work is expected to be finished with a final inspection mid-March, to be followed by the official opening, according to Szepatowski. Once the shelter is open, daily operations of the community effort may

be tied into after-school programs, she added.

Although the site is only a temporary fix to a larger problem, Szepatowski noted the show of commitment toward a shelter with a centralized site "allows us to go after grant money." The volunteer group was still actively seeking a permanent home for the shelter, she said.

Szepatowski told those present that assistance was needed with Sheetrocking, suspended ceiling installation, window replacement, and other cleaning and repairs at the building. "We'll start immediately with the windows," she said, noting that the replacement windows were salvaged from the old planning office.

Once the shelter is up and running, volunteers to visit and handle the animals on a regular basis will be crucial, the councilwoman said. Already volunteers take in animals, update the breed and animal rescue network, and help seniors with veterinary bills through care and monetary support. "We have a good network," she added.

Veterinary bills for animals rescued through the network average

\$2,000 per year, with upwards of \$10,000 needed for food and cat litter, according to Szepatowski. "There are many animal lovers on this island who kindly give us donations," she added.

Town Administrator Bruce Keiser expressed support for the plan by telephone earlier this week. "The improvements to the building may enhance the property value for the town," he said, adding that the renovations used "no taxpayers' money." The town plans to sell the lot to an affordable housing developer later in the year, after the new town hall complex is completed.

Keiser noted that the town has liability insurance to cover an animal shelter on the island.

### Bridge players sought

The group that plays bridge at the Pemberton Apartments Community Room on Tuesday mornings is looking for some new members.

Current bridge players, who get together from 10:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., have between two years and many years of experience playing the game. Call Fran at 423-9191.

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