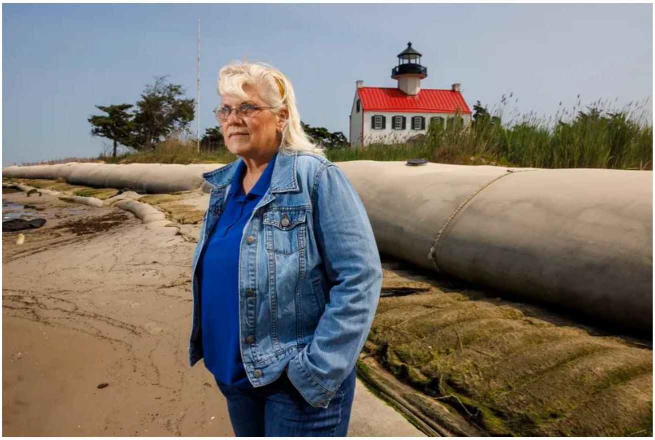
Friday, May 26, 2023
Today's Paper

The Philadelphia Inquirer

NEWS

Lighthouse operator is battling not only rapid bayshore erosion, but the State of New Jersey

A nonprofit used bake sales and other fund-raisers to restore the 19th century lighthouse after a fire. Now it's fighting the tide and terms of a new lease.



Nancy Patterson with the Maurice River Historical Society on the beach in front of the East Point Lighthouse in Heislerville, N.J. Behind here are geotextile tubes use to help against beach erosion.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

by Frank Kummer
Updated on May 19, 2023, 5:00 a.m. ET

The quaint, 174-year-old East Point Lighthouse commands a dazzling view of the confluence of the Delaware Bay and Maurice River — the same forces that could soon swallow it.

Severe erosion has reduced the beach in front of the lighthouse by three-quarters since the 1940s. The lighthouse basement floods after storms.

Nancy Patterson, volunteer president of the Maurice River Historical Society, which operates the lighthouse, says the worry keeps her up at night. But her most recent insomnia stems from battles with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection to not only prevent the lighthouse from being engulfed by the bay, but also for the society to retain management of the historical structure.

The fully restored 19th-century lighthouse is perched on the state-owned Heislerville Wildlife Management Area in Cumberland County, which the DEP oversees.

The historical society currently holds a state license to operate the lighthouse, but the DEP opened a new leasing arrangement to public bidding May 1. Though the society hopes to win the bid, it could be bittersweet even if it does, Patterson said, because the new financial terms are onerous. At the same time, she's pressing for the DEP to come up with a long-term solution to erosion.

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"I never know which fire to put out first," Patterson said while walking up the beach one day last week. "Oh, my gosh, I lost so much sleep over the lease application that it's crazy. I'm still losing sleep because after 50 years, I do not want to be the one that loses this lighthouse."

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Step Back in Time at East Point Lighthouse
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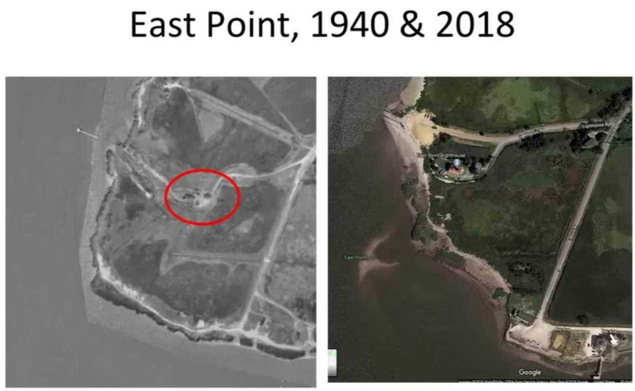
Second oldest lighthouse in N.J.

The historic brick lighthouse, second oldest in New Jersey after the Sandy Hook Lighthouse, was built in 1849 and has survived decades of storms, vandalism and a disastrous 1971 fire. After the fire, the Maurice River Historical Society led an $850,000 restoration effort along with the Cumberland County Improvement Authority and the New Jersey Historic Trust.

The historical society began managing the lighthouse in 1993 under a lease with the state. It took decades for the society to raise the money and complete the restoration of the lighthouse, which reopened in 2017 with a functional blinking red beacon that pulses over the dark waters each night as a navigational aid serviced by the U.S. Coast Guard.

The society's lease expired in 2017, and the state instead issued the organization an operating license in 2021 that expires Aug. 11.

About 6,000 people annually tour the two-story, Cape Cod-style lighthouse with its white walls and red roof, museum and gift shop. They file through rooms filled with antiques and photos placed to re-create the feel of when lighthouse keepers and their families lived there. Tourists climb the equivalent of four stories to the tower room for an unbroken view of the bay, river and surrounding wetlands. They can even turn on the beacon. Tours are limited to weekends because they are staffed by local volunteers.



Satellite images show erosion of land in front of East Point Lighthouse in Maurice River, Cumberland County, N.J.
Maurice River Historical Society

Erosion is eating away the bayshore

East Point Lighthouse is tucked at the end of a dirt road on a remote stretch near the end of the state where horseshoe crabs and birds outnumber people. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The bayshore faces natural erosion quickened by sea level rise and land that's naturally sinking due to geological forces. This shoreline has no regular federal or state replenishment efforts, as there are along the economically lucrative Atlantic Coast.

Larry Hajna, a DEP spokesman, called the lighthouse an "icon of the Delaware Bay region." He said that, in 2019, the DEP installed a geotextile system that includes an 8-foot-diameter tube made of a durable synthetic membrane filled with sand. The 570-foot-long system runs parallel to the shoreline between the water and the lighthouse, Hajna said, and "is working as designed to protect the lighthouse."

Patterson said the system helps break waves but calls the design "underscaled," with a life span expected to last a few more years, at the most. She said water escapes during storms and floods around the lighthouse. She believes a permanent bulkhead is needed.

State Sen. Michael Testa, a Republican who represents the area, recently issued a statement asking the DEP to work with Maurice River Township and the historical society on a plan to protect the lighthouse beyond the life of the current system.

"I'm concerned that the DEP hasn't shown much urgency in developing a long-term plan to protect the historic East Point Lighthouse from future beach erosion," Testa said in the statement, adding, "With the current protective Geotube nearing its end of life, there isn't much time to waste.”

East Point Lighthouse, 10 Lighthouse Rd, Heislerville, NJ., Wednesday, May 17, 2023.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

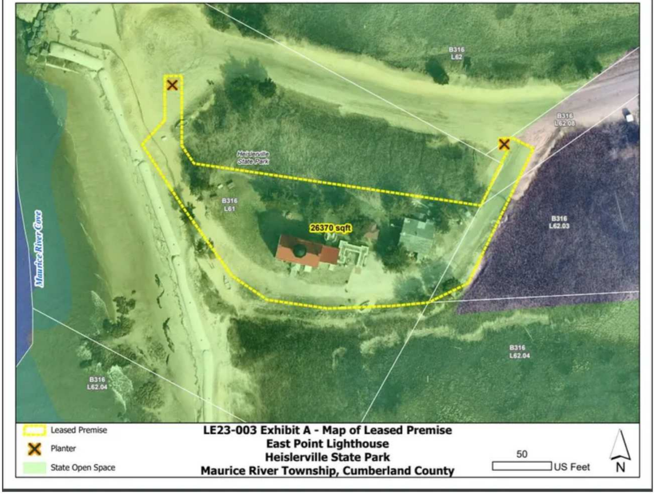
Terms of the new lease

The nonprofit Maurice River Historical Society initially raised money over decades for the restoration through bake sales, yard sales, and other fund-raisers. Grants came later.

In March, the society learned it would have to bid for the new lease. The lease requires bidders to submit the highest amount they are willing to pay for each year, above a minimum 5% of their total gross revenue from things such as tours or gift shop sales.

“What an unbelievable slap in the face,” Patterson said. “The lease is horrible. Right off the top they are going to take 5%, and they can raise that at any point for no reason. They’re going to take money from any T-shirt we sell, any tours, tickets, donations or grant funding. I think it’s going to cost us an additional $10,000 a year. I have no idea where I’m going to come up with that. It’s going to kill the gift shop.”

Patterson, who grew up in Philadelphia, moved with her family to the area 20 years ago. She left teaching and became an artist. Her work, along with that of local artisans, is sold in the lighthouse gift shop.



A New Jersey Department Environmental Protection map for a lease it is issuing to operate the East Point Lighthouse on the Delaware Bayshore in Maurice River, Cumberland County.
New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

The society has an annual budget of about $43,000 for the lighthouse.

Patterson said she does not know whether others submitted bids. She said the lease would start in June.

The DEP declined to comment on the lease.

U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, a Republican whose district includes Cumberland County, said he has tried to mediate between the Maurice River Historical Society and DEP since 2021.

“I remain committed to ensuring that a long-term lease agreement comes to fruition between NJDEP and the Maurice River Historical Society,” Van Drew said in an email.

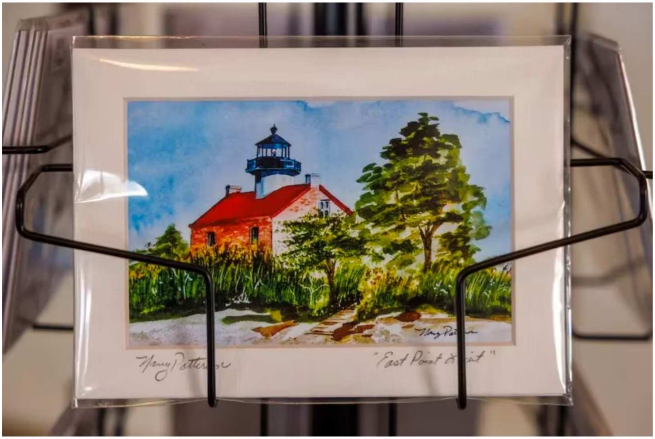
Nancy Patterson with the Maurice River Historical Society, in the lantern room of East Point Lighthouse.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

A perpetually flooded basement

Patterson said water from storms flows through gaps of the geotextile system and gets funneled next to the lighthouse. Two sump pumps remove water from the basement to the outside. But the discharged water has no place to go because Hurricane Sandy in 2012 filled in a drainage ditch. Patterson said she's worked with Maurice River Township, Cumberland County, and the DEP on a plan to regrade the area and build dunes. But the plan has stalled.

Meanwhile, the society also has come up with a $30,000 plan to install a basement drying system.

"The lighthouse is really an incredible success story of the community to have a place like this that's bringing in tourism," Patterson said. "it's a big deal."



A watercolor for sale in the gift shop by Nancy Patterson with the Maurice River Historical Society, caretaker of the East Point Lighthouse.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Published May 19, 2023

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I cover regional environmental issues, including climate change, from the Poconos to Philly and its suburbs, through to the New Jersey Shore.