

Sun-Sentinel: Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse may get rare federal designation

Congressman seeks a special designation for Jupiter Inlet area

By Ivette M. Yee | South Florida Sun-Sentinel

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Since 1860, the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse has guided ships and sailors to safety. Now Jupiter town officials and U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney are asking a congressional panel to protect it by designating it an "outstanding natural area."

The designation would safeguard the lighthouse and its surrounding 126 acres from development and could attract federal grants to support new activities and programs.

"It puts it in the same category as national monuments," said Jamie Stuve, executive director of the Loxahatchee River Historical Society, which manages the lighthouse and its museum and conducts educational tours and programs. "It saves this little jewel of a property and keeps it in a wilderness context."

On Tuesday, Jupiter Mayor Karen Golonka and Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, testified before a subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands in Washington. If approved, the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse would be the second in the country with such a designation. The other is in Yaquina Head, Ore.

"Every community has its own special place, the essence of the community that provides meaning and identity to its people. It may be an area that, in times of distress or celebration serves as a special community gathering spot," Golonka said to the panel, according to congressional transcripts. "The Jupiter Inlet and Lighthouse has been and continues to be such a place for the people of Jupiter."

The lighthouse site is owned or maintained by several groups including the U.S. Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management, the Coast Guard, Palm Beach County's Department of Environmental Resources Management, the Loxahatchee River Historical Society and the town of Jupiter. If designated, the Historical Society would still manage the lighthouse and raise money.

The site is home to more than 18 threatened or endangered species of plants and wildlife. Historical Society officials said it is rich with history and contains both prehistoric and historical artifacts. Archaeological evidence of American Indians dates to 3000 B.C.

Reports claim that Ponce de Leon sailed into the Jupiter Inlet in 1513. The site also has strong ties to maritime and military history. The lighthouse was designed by Lt. George Meade, who later as a Union general defeated Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg in 1863, Historical Society officials said.

"It's important we preserve the lighthouse both for historical and environmental reasons," Mahoney said on Wednesday. "It's absolutely breathtaking - not just its design but its location."

Mahoney, who sponsored the legislation, said a federal designation could bolster tourism to the area. A similar bill by Sens. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., and Mel Martinez, R-Fla., is running through the Senate.

A decision on the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse is expected within the year, Mahoney said.