

# The Press

OF ATLANTIC CITY

## Brigantine volunteers restoring lighthouse

Local contractors pitch in for free after the island's symbol was damaged by Hurricane Sandy.

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Staff Writer

In the boom years of the 1920s, a fleet of buses ferried prospective land buyers from Atlantic City to Brigantine across a new million-dollar bridge.

Their destination: a lighthouse at the center of a traffic circle with broad avenues stretching out across the sandy expanse of vacant, buildable lots.

Inside the gleaming white tower, salesmen from the Island Development Corp. began their pitch for a "twin resort of Atlantic City."

"The lighthouse was the focal point," says Roy Kramer, curator of the city's historical society. "Come to the lighthouse," they said.

The 1929 stock market crash stunted the real estate

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Staff photo by Michael Ein

Ernie Purdy, supervisor of Brigantine Public Works, stands in the Brigantine Lighthouse, which a group of contractors have volunteered to renovate.

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## Restore

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development. However, the lighthouse became a Brigantine icon akin to Margate's Lucy the Elephant.

Nearly a century later, dozens of contractors are mobilizing to restore the structure, which — along with much of the island — was severely damaged by Hurricane Sandy.

After the storm, the city's manpower and resources already were committed to the larger tasks of clearing streets, repairing bulkheads and supervising reconstruction. So City Engineer Ed Stinson and other officials consulted with a number of contractors to work out the scope of the lighthouse project in advance of a request for bids.

"Every contractor we met out there asked, 'Why don't we volunteer?'" Stinson recalled.

Soon, about a dozen contractors and supply companies had signed on, donating time and materials to the project. Stinson said it's difficult to put a price on the work — likely more than \$50,000 — but it's substantial.

The deck around the lantern room had deteriorated, allowing water to infiltrate the building, he said. That meant rotted materials inside and out, as well as visible water marks on the facade. Meanwhile, more

than a foot of flood water had inundated the first floor.

Stinson said many of the contractors are busy with other Sandy-related projects and a few had damage in their own homes and offices. Lighthouse construction is being performed piecemeal, but he said that's better than the alternatives.

"That's the flip side of volunteer work," he said. "Unfortunately, I can't bang on the door and get them in here tomorrow, so it drags out."

Interior work should be completed by the end of next month, while the exterior may be done by November.

"I think this is good for the community," said Andy Mason, whose Atlantic City-based Mase Enterprises worked on the exterior deck. "The community was devastated by the storm — there are still houses that need to come down."

Despite the substantial damage, Public Works Superintendent Ernie Purdy said he's impressed with the lighthouse's durability.

"You look at this structure," he said. "We've had accidents here, people running into it, and a hurricane. It's still here."

The lighthouse served many purposes over the last century. In addition to its role as the centerpiece of a real estate development, it became a police station in the 1930s, when the municipality had only a few officers.

"If they had a call, they'd turn the light on," said Purdy, 54, a lifelong resident. "If the other officer was cruising around, checking on things, he'd know to come back."

The steel door of the lighthouse's holding cell now is on display a hundred yards away in the Historical Society's museum. Later, in the 1970s, the structure housed the city's original museum, Kramer said.

In 1995, a similar volunteer effort helped restore the structure after it had fallen into disrepair. This year's project led to the preservation of its original lamp, which was manufactured in France in 1923 and remained operational through the early 1990s.

Public Works Supervisor John Doring, who restored it, said the lamp was pitted and corroded, but otherwise in fair condition. It was loaned to the Historical Society this month and now is on display.

Despite its lamp, Kramer said, the lighthouse was too low and too far from the beach to ever serve as a navigational aid. Instead, it was part of a promotional push by a group of wealthy real estate developers — many of whom were part of Atlantic City's Republican political establishment led by Enoch "Nucky" Johnson.

Kramer, 55, said the landscape of Brigantine itself is a testament to their power. Even the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' rejection of a plan

to fill in land on which they planned to build a bridge across Absecon Channel didn't stop them.

"Overnight, they just brought in dredges and filled it in anyway," he said. "That's how powerful the Republican machine was back then. You couldn't imagine that happening today."

A 1926 promotional brochure boasts a variety of projects the group envisioned. Many were completed over the span of just two years, including the 10-story Hotel Brigantine, a professional golf course and a lavish entertainment pier jutting out from a milelong boardwalk.

Additionally, the Island Development Corp. built 30 miles of street, 60 miles of sidewalk, a new city hall and a school that now is the city's library building off 15th Street South. Its long-term ambitions called for a grid of residential neighborhoods, which eventually came over



The Brigantine Lighthouse, a local landmark, was built as the center of a real estate development that was never completed.

Staff photo by Michael Ein

the course of decades. There also was slated a thoroughfare that would connect to a highway system to the north in Ocean County, which never did.

"There is no location that offers such inducements as Brigantine Beach, twin resort of Atlantic City," reads the brochure.

The lighthouse has remained an enduring symbol for the city, even though the real estate development was never fully realized. That's part of the reason why

the contractors have rallied around it.

"It's an honor to help out a landmark," said Bill Hannan, whose Brigantine-based W.T. Hannan Builders is installing new doors and windows. "Like Margate has Lucy, we have the lighthouse. We have to keep it up and make it look pretty for another 100 years."

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