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BODY:

DURHAM - Last month, on July 11, the 150-year-old, 650-ton Highland Lighthouse began a 470-foot trip back from the edge of an eroding bluff in the Cape Cod National Seashore. After its arrival at its new home the lighthouse is expected to be safe for at least another 100 years.

But on North Carolina's Outer Banks, the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse continues to stand in a much more dangerous location than the Highland Lighthouse, while plans for moving it still reside on a dusty back shelf somewhere.

In our view, the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse should be moved immediately.

There is no question that if it is not moved, it will tumble into the sea. The Cape Hatteras shoreline has the largest average waves on the East Coast south of Maine, and storms are a constant threat. All it will take is a storm of the "right" intensity coming from the "right" direction. Destruction of this beautiful landmark is only a matter of time.

Currently, the lighthouse is protected by a bank of sandbags and three aging steel groins (walls built perpendicular to the shoreline that trap sand). The National Park Service proposes to put off moving the lighthouse for a few years while building a fourth groin and adding more sandbags.

In our opinion and that of the N.C. Coastal Resources Commission, this will do little to relieve the danger.

A number of factors are preventing the immediate relocation of the lighthouse. One is opposition to the move led by a local motel owner who (correctly) believes that once the lighthouse is moved and the sandbags are removed, the motel may be in danger of falling in as the shoreline straightens out.

And local legend has it that the lighthouse cannot be moved because it may be damaged or destroyed. This is also the view fostered by the Wilmington District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

If all this seems familiar, it should. Lost in the dust seems to be the fact that a panel of distinguished engineers and scientists from the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering was convened in 1987 at the request of the Park Service. The panel concluded that the lighthouse was sufficiently well constructed to move in safe fashion using off-the-shelf technology. It also concluded that the lighthouse must be moved to save it.

The Save the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse Committee, keeper of the funds raised from contributions from North Carolina schoolchildren, is another major obstacle.

A few years ago the committee paid to have artificial seaweed emplaced on the sea floor in front of the structure to build up the beach, against all expert advice. It didn't work. Recently the committee has offered to donate \$ 250,000 to the Park Service to help preserve the lighthouse, providing the Park Service will promise not to move the structure.

In this effort, the committee is using the donated funds to further its own ends. The view that the lighthouse can be saved in place completely ignores a large body of expert opinion - and a large body of water.

Finally, we believe there is an underlying concern among some of the leading politicians and developers of Dare County that if the lighthouse is moved it will bring unwanted attention to the serious erosion problem prevalent on the Outer Banks, and slow down development.

These individuals also believe that moving the lighthouse will set a poor example as to the solution to erosion. That is, if you can simply move buildings back, the federal government is not as likely to come in with millions of dollars for beach replenishment.

If North Carolinians wish to have the lighthouse preserved for future generations, they should support the Coastal Resources Commission's forward-looking efforts to find a lasting and safe solution. We think that we will be the laughingstock of the coast when an easily movable lighthouse, a state treasure, falls into the sea.

Moving the lighthouse would demonstrate a respect for the sea and a recognition of the reality of our eroding coast.

(Orrin Pilkey and David Bush are coastal geology professors, Pilkey at Duke and Bush at the University of West Georgia. David Fischetti, a structural engineer in Cary, collaborated on this piece. The three men constituted the Move the Lighthouse Committee, which was mothballed when it was announced by the National Park Service that the lighthouse would be moved.)

GRAPHIC: photo; file

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