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Committee created for Taylor's Isle

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By Peter Boody

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After hearing assurances from Mashomack Preserve Director Mike Laspia that the Nature Conservancy has no objection to the preservation of the old house on Taylor's Island,

the Town Board on Tuesday voted 5-0 to create a Taylor's Island Preservation and Management Committee and named P.A.T. Hunt and Richie Surozenski as its co-chairs and Supervisor-elect Alfred Kilb and Mr. Laspia as two of its members.

In addition to finding additional members, the committee's first goal will be to develop immediate plans for the Highway Department to stabilize the town-owned building to prevent further deterioration and vandalism.

Its major goal will be to develop plans to submit to the Town Board for the restoration and future use of the house as a public resource in conjunction with the Nature Conservancy, which controls access to the town-owned property in Coecles Harbor.

Saying that there was "some discrepancy" in some recollections and interpretations of a Taylor's Island agreement made by the town and the Conservancy in 2001, Mr. Laspia told the Town Board at its Tuesday work session that it was "not true" the agreement called for "razing the building."

"If you read" the agreement, he said, "there's no mention" of that. "We went down that road one time before," Mr. Laspia added, referring to the last time there was an outcry from Islanders who insisted the Taylor's Island house be preserved as an important local landmark. "We said fine, the town can fix it up, we want to be a part of that decision," Mr. Laspia said.

The agreement calls on the Conservancy to "undertake ecological projects" on the Island, he said, and to remove a crumbling bulkhead and stabilize the island's shoreline.

An "Exhibit A" attachment to the agreement that has been on file in Town Hall lists removing the house as the first step proposed by the Nature Conservancy, saving its fieldstone fireplace and chimney for use with a simple shelter to be erected on the site.

But apparently "Exhibit A" was "pulled off the table after we talked about it publicly," said Mr. Kilb, who was highway superintendent at the time. "We agreed it wouldn't be" torn down and "the Highway Department and private citizens would maintain it."

"That's contrary to this," Supervisor Art Williams said, referring to addendum to the agreement. Mr. Laspia noted, however, that the text of the agreement itself includes two references to preserving the building.

It's "either a very poorly worded agreement or something got lost in the translation," Mr. Williams said, describing the misunderstanding as "bizarre."

Resident Steve Lenox recalled from the audience that about 30 people attended a Town Board meeting on Taylor's Island in the summer of 2000. "We all walked it and agreed to save it and leave it the way was, get a committee together and keep it in good shape."

"What happened?" asked Councilman Peter Reich, who with Mr. Williams sparked a new uproar over Taylor's Island when they presented a concept drawing this fall drafted by architect Pam Pospisil to replace the house -- as a liability and maintenance headache -- except for the fireplace and chimney. That would remain as the centerpiece of a rustic open-air pavilion. They proposed using a balance of Community Development funds of about \$100,000 to pay for it.

News of the proposal prompted Mr. Kilb, Mr. Surozenski, Bridg and P.A.T. Hunt and others to plead with the board to maintain the house and island -- which the town acquired from the estate of S. Gregory Taylor in 1998 -- as a landmark and symbol of Shelter Island to which many residents are emotionally linked.

In answer to Mr. Reich's question about "what happened" after the last time it was agreed that a committee would be formed to oversee the Island, Mr. Kilb replied that Highway Department workers and volunteers repaired the structure and stabilized it to "keep it weather-tight until a fund-raising plan" would be developed. He acknowledged that no progress was made but now the pot has been stirred again.

He said another visit to the Island was in order to re-stabilize the house to protect it from weather and vandalism and that Highway Department workers were "more than capable of doing" the job.

"This is like Gene Shepherd," the heavy-equipment operator known for his ability to restore classic machines, "pulling out a rusted hulk out of a creek and having the engine running in a week," Mr. Kilb said.

He added that "this structure has a lot of emotional connection to people on Shelter Island. The people of this Island are more than capable of taking care of it."

Council members Ed Brown, Christine Lewis and Neal Raymond appeared to be solidly in support of the preservationists' effort while Mr. Williams and Mr. Reich seemed somewhat skeptical during the discussion. But the vote to formally create the committee was unanimous.