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Thursday, December 15, 2005

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Editorial

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It's an appealing idea to restore the old turn-of-the-century cottage on Taylor's Island and put it to use by the town as some kind of environmental education center and possibly even as a place for a couple of people at a time to spend the night.

But there's no doubt the gift of Taylor's Island has been problematic to the Town of Shelter Island and so is its future.

How much work the house needs seems to be a matter of opinion. Supervisor-elect Alfred Kilb Jr. -- whose father was a caretaker there before the property was willed to the town -- is certain that it is essentially sound. Councilman Peter Reich, whose business (like Mr. Kilb's) is construction, thinks the costs of repairing the structure to make it viable for public use would be prohibitive. He's proposed an open-air wooden pavilion to provide a gathering place and basic shelter with the existing stone fireplace as its centerpiece.

Why not keep the house? Aside from any construction and renovation issues, operating it to be a kind of educational center would take staffing and a steady stream of revenue, not to mention a lot of planning and organizational effort to maintain a program there. Does that kind of commitment of money and personnel make sense when access to the island is so limited? The nearby Mashomack Preserve has excellent programs and easy access off Route 114. Could the town do any better? Should it really try?

People who love history, the water and the outdoors would certainly cherish a chance to stay overnight at the house. No doubt they'd gladly pay a fee to do so, as guests may do at the restored Bug Light off Orient and Rose Island Light in Rhode Island. But how would maintaining the house for guests work if it were also an educational center? Even as just a guesthouse, how steep would the insurance bill be? How much would it cost to provide the services essential to a guesthouse? Is the town, with its limited municipal infrastructure, in a position to handle those obligations forevermore?

If there has been a compelling need for a town-run program centered on Taylor's Island, wouldn't it have become evident at times other than two moments of crisis since 2000 when proponents -- fearing a move to raze the building by the Town Board -- have risen up to demand preservation? Nothing has happened since the first crisis. Will a real volunteer preservation movement take wing now?

That's the test. The community, through a committee formed Tuesday by the Town Board, should be allowed to take it.

If the community wants that outcome enough to make it really work, the landmark house on Taylor's Island should be saved and used. That means developing a realistic plan for operating, maintaining, staffing and funding whatever the building will be.