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Abcore Restoration completes repairs to Conimicut Shoals Lighthouse - by Frank Picozzi

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Frank Picozzi

For more than 155 years, a stately Conanicut Shoals Lighthouse has stood as a symbol of historic Conanicut Village and the City of Warwick as a whole, even as it has served a functional benefit that's a critical asset to our local shipping, trades, and recreational boating economy. It has provided safe passage to the many generations who have traversed the waters of Narragansett Bay, played into romantic notions of a life at sea, and has maintained a steady and steadfast role in the Ocean State's rich maritime history.

In addition to its maritime and cultural significance, the lighthouse has tremendous historical value, as evidenced by its inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places on March 30, 1988. Over many decades, light keepers, and, often, their families, called the lighthouse home, and their lives and work there have their own special place in Warwick's and Rhode Island's history.

The city acquired the lighthouse – built in 1883 to replace one originally constructed in 1868 - from the federal government in 2004 with an eye to repairing the damage that had occurred over time. However, the subsequent economic downturn several years later, coupled by further funding challenges, put any hopes of repairing the iconic structure on hold, even as many watched its slow deterioration in dismay. Boarded up windows, bird droppings, peeling paint, rusted, leaky doors, crumbling architectural features, broken railings, and a weed-infested foundation became an all-too-familiar and dreary sight.

Happily, the lighthouse stands proudly today, restored to its breathtaking former glory, thanks to a \$775,000 federal grant secured by former R.I. congressman Jim Langevin. Late last month, several city officials made the boat trip out to see the just-completed results. Abcore Restoration, out of Narragansett, contracted with the city to perform the work. Owner Keith Lescarbeau and his crew put their experience of lighthouse restoration – they've refurbished roughly a dozen lighthouses in the region, including Dutch Island, Block Island lighthouses, Pomham Rocks, and Plum Beach – to work, lovingly restoring the Conanicut light despite the sometimes risky and challenging conditions the weather and the sea often posed.

The project entailed some three months of prepping and then another three months on the actual renovation work. Assessing material conditions, ensuring perfect measurements, and making special architectural features, doors, railings, and window frames were part of the project. A variety of machinery and tools, including a 3,000 lb. compressor supported by 6 x 6 beams, pneumatic chisels, and needle guns were used. Repairs to the light cap and installation of Lexan sheets in place of windows were also made. And, when replacement of gutters with a newly-fabricated system proved too costly to stay within the budget, Lescarbeau did the work and his company absorbed the cost.

Abcore also cleaned the interior. With the lighthouse now weathertight, the next step will be to secure additional funding to restore the interior to its former glory as well, with an eye, perhaps, to partnering with a private entity interested in turning it into a bed-and-breakfast.

From those involved in preparing the grant application, to the nearly two dozen elected officials, non-profits, neighborhood groups, environmental organizations, and other civic groups that wrote letters in support of the grant, to those who approved the funding, to the dedicated and generous professionals found at Abcore, to those who never gave up hope that this day would come, restoring this iconic historic, cultural, and maritime treasure was truly a widely-shared labor of love. We look forward to what the future holds next for our beloved Conimicut Lighthouse.

Frank Picozzi is the mayor of the city of Warwick, R.I.

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