

HDC, water district partner to save historic home

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YORK – Although characterized only in its “infant stages,” a plan to save a historic house on Mountain Road could be in the offing, saving it from demolition.

The York Historic District Commission is working with the York Water District to save the home located at 200 Mountain Road, recently acquired by the YWD but lying in the Chase’s Pond watershed, a public-water-supply, source-water protection area.

“We have an unfortunate conflict between two important considerations: a clean drinking water supply and historic preservation,” said HDC Secretary Scott Stevens.

York Water District Superintendent Don Neumann acknowledged last week that an abutter to 200 Mountain Road wants to buy the house and move it to his property. The neighbor currently is researching whether his property has a sufficient footprint to locate another house on it.

“We told him we’ll give him six months to see if he can get it done,” Neumann said last week. “He’s very interested. This would be a good win for everybody if this works, so we decided to give him until April to do all his homework.”

However, the water district board of trustees must give final approval to the move even if the abutter could comply with all local land-use regulations.

When HDC members looked at the 200 Mountain Road home last summer, they found a timber frame in good shape and a cellar with remarkable features in uncommonly original condition, Stevens said. The structure appears to date from the late 18th or early 19th century. Its form – an elongated Cape – is a quirky variation only found in Cape Neddick and Ogunquit.

It “represents a quirky little variation of a traditional style that tells us about the community. One by one these buildings are going away, replaced by houses that you could find anywhere, and with them go a piece of our town,” Stevens said.

Stevens called the 200 Mountain Road house part “of the built heritage of the mountain district of the town that hasn’t gotten a lot of attention.” Its foundation is “surprising,” he said, what one would expect to find in the Emerson-Wilcox House, which is a “head scratcher.”

In light of these qualities, the HDC sought some means of saving the house.

While moving a structure out of its original context loses important aspects of its history, and so considered a last resort in preservation philosophy, it is preferable to demolition, Stevens said.

The first line of defense in the protection of a public water supply from contamination is to own or control all of the lands that surround the supply. Ideally, the watershed of a public water supply would be pristine and untouched.

The alternative is to purchase properties within the watershed when they become available, remove the buildings, pump out and cap off septic systems, then allow the property to return to a natural condition. The York Water District originally submitted an application to the town for a permit to demolish this structure but has since withdrawn it.

“In each case, there are logical short-term reasons for owners to tear down historic buildings,” said Stevens, “but the cumulative effect is the steady erosion of our town’s historic character.”

Speaking of 200 Mountain Road, he added: “We’re just trying and hoping to find an alternative to its destruction.”

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