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Saylor Kilns group receives nonprofit status

Fund-raising set to begin at Coplay site

By AL RECKER
 Press writer

Efforts to raise money to preserve the remaining five uncapped historic Coplay cement kilns are expected to accelerate dramatically now that the volunteer group charged with the task has finally received its nonprofit status.

Borough Council President Beverly Miller, a member of the Saylor Cement Kilns Preservation Society, told The Press the long-awaited 501(c) designation, sought more than a year ago, has finally been approved. It permits donors--in particular, those in the private sector--to receive tax write-offs for their donation to the organization working to preserve the kilns. The group has already been promised some significant donations.

This is the second effort made by citizens and the borough to preserve the brick cement kilns. A previous citizens committee embarked on a similar venture in the late 1990s when Lehigh County threatened to demolish the kilns. The work was performed in 2000.

Four of the kilns were restored. Many the kilns' bricks were relined and the top of the shafts capped. As for the remaining five kilns, the county insisted the borough take ownership and raise the funds for repairs to prevent them from being destroyed.

The kilns are the first and remaining Portland cement structures in the United States. A previous borough council in the early 1970s convinced then-Coplay Cement Mfg. Co. to turn the deteriorating kilns over to Lehigh County. Then-county Commissioner Donald Hoffman spearheaded an effort to build a museum. It was removed a few years later because several artifacts were damaged from a water leak and improper ventilation.

The Saylor Cement Kilns appeared in a cover photo and story of a December newsletter entitled "Preserving Pennsylvania." It cited 10 historic sites and structures at risk of demolition and extinction.

The story noted Coplay Cement manufactured the first Portland cement in America in 1871. In 1892, a growing demand for cement required the construction of eleven 93-foot-tall Schoefer kilns, a Danish modification of a model originally developed in Germany. The Schoefer kilns were in use, on the west side of North Second Street, from 1893 to 1904. They were replaced by rotary kilns, a new technology that yielded lower operating costs.

In 1980, the kilns were listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Coplay Cement played a key role in the development of the American Portland industry. There are no known kilns standing in America.

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Although the remaining kilns are much lower than the original 93-foot height, they were inclement weather by an enclosed building. It was razed in the 1920s. Society President Lou Jany said he hopes to raise the funds, restore the kilns and creat to preserve the industry's rich history for generations.