A highly touted plan to restore one of California's most venerable coastal landmarks, Pigeon Point Lighthouse, has stalled amid bureaucratic delay and financial woes, leaving the once-majestic structure padlocked to the public and severely deteriorating.

The brick lighthouse on San Mateo County's southern coast, built in 1871 and featured in TV commercials and magazine ads, was once a guide for wooden schooners along the treacherous shoreline between Half Moon Bay and Santa Cruz.

Five years ago, former Interior Secretary Gale Norton announced the federal government would transfer the 115-foot structure to California's state parks department as part of a $5 million public-private restoration partnership that she heralded as "nothing short of grand."

Sadly, however, the lighthouse sits blocked off behind chain-link fences, its once gleaming white facade now streaked with rust. Its black iron bracings are so corroded that an engineering report a year ago described its upper levels as "in critical condition" and so "structurally unsound" that emergency repairs should be done to help avoid "catastrophic failure."

The federal government still hasn't even transferred the title for the lighthouse and its five acres to the state.

The Schwarzenegger administration, which last year proposed closing most of California's state parks to help balance the budget, hasn't provided restoration funding. A private campaign to raise $5 million for repairs, spearheaded by the nonprofit California State Parks Foundation in San Francisco, has raised one-tenth that amount.

"This is such a beautiful building. People are drawn to lighthouses. There's something romantic and majestic about them. Each one is unique and has its own history," said Nancy Frost, a volunteer state parks docent tending to native plants last week at the lighthouse site.

Through the 1990s, tourists and school children enjoyed tours, with docents wearing light keeper uniforms proudly showing the huge Fresnel lens, made of 1,008 pieces of hand-polished glass from 1860s France.
State parks officials, who have managed the site since 1980, closed the lighthouse — the tallest on the Pacific Coast — to tours in 2001 after two large pieces of brick and iron fell from the top of the building. Now, with each passing week, the brisk sea air corrodes the lighthouse a little more. Water sits inside on worn windowsills. Floor tiles are broken. Peeled paint reveals exposed brick.

"Not being able to take people up is really sad," said Frost, one of about 10 volunteers who offer weekend tours of the grounds. "We have to apologize. People are really disappointed."

What happened?

Steve Lehman, deputy state parks director, said his department hasn't been able to take ownership of the lighthouse from the U.S. Coast Guard. He said it took three years for the federal General Services Administration to provide the original deeds. Those documents, handwritten in 1877, were vague and incomplete.

So state parks decided to resurvey the property to have a clear title, a process slowed by budget woes but completed last June. Lehman said he hopes the final transfer can happen this summer.

"This is not unlike so many other parks in the state parks system. We have so many unmet needs right now," Lehman said. "It is one of those cultural jewels that needs to be protected. When times get better, we'll be glad we acquired it."

Sara Feldman, vice president of the nonprofit California State Parks Foundation, said her group couldn't raise significant money to restore the lighthouse until it knew the extent of its damage. When the partnership was announced in 2005, state parks said it was going to conduct engineering studies but then pulled back due to the worsening state budget, leaving the work to the nonprofit foundation. The foundation has raised $495,000 to date, and in 2008 spent about $200,000 of that to hire an engineering firm, Architectural Resources Group, of San Francisco. Its 310-page report found damage much more extensive than thought, with restoration now estimated at $9.2 million.

"It has been a very challenging time for nonprofits. At Pigeon Point it was complicated by not knowing what we are dealing with," Feldman said, adding that she is confident her group can now raise the money.

Audrey Rust, president of the nonprofit Peninsula Open Space Trust in Palo Alto, has raised millions to purchase land around the lighthouse to preserve the scenic coastal character. She said that if voters in November pass a state ballot measure increasing auto registration fees by $18 to fund state parks, the lighthouse project and hundreds like it around California will be addressed.

"I'm very sad about it," Rust said. "Pigeon Point is a beloved place with a great deal of value. I have every reason to believe we can get it back on track."