

Park District gains property – August 2008

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The Chicago Park District (CPD) has added two parks to its list of properties on the city's South Side. Once the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum (NVVAM) secures a new space, the CPD will convert its 30,000 square foot facility at 1801 S. Indiana Ave. into the South Loop Field House. The CPD also will add a landscaped plaza to the property, which will include the adjacent Women's Park and will be open to the public; previously, the Women's Park fell under a different City agency's jurisdiction.

Jerry Kykisz, NVVAM's general manager, said the museum needs to relocate to overcome issues such as high maintenance costs and parking problems. NVVAM and its collection of artwork by war veterans will remain at the site for another three years while the deal with the CPD is finalized, Kykisz explained. Among the sites under consideration is a space near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the riverwalk between Wabash Avenue and State Street along the Chicago River.

Meanwhile, at the sprawling new 4.2-acre park at 24th and Federal Streets, the CPD plans to add a playground, baseball field, athletic field for football and soccer, walking paths, lighting, landscaping, drinking fountains, and fencing. The project will cost an estimated \$2.3 million and should be completed by the end of September.

--Miriam Y. Cintron

Park district acquires art museum, park, and Clarke House

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By Susan Fong

The Chicago Park District Board of Commissioners recently approved a transaction that will transfer the current site of the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum (NVVAM) at 1801 S. Indiana Ave. from the City of Chicago to the Chicago Park District (CPD). The transaction also includes the adjacent Hillary Rodham Clinton Women's Park and the Clarke House Museum at 1827 S. Indiana Ave.

Located on the Near South Side, the 2.49-acre site holds the 29,746-square-foot NVVAM building; the park, which features walks, landscaping, gardens, a fountain, and parking; and the Clarke House Museum, which is the oldest house in the city. The CPD will use the NVVAM building as a cultural center for park and recreation activities.

Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance (PDNA) representative Jeffery Ayersman said the PDNA is glad the City stepped in and looks forward to developing programs with the park district to serve the community.

NVVAM will continue to occupy the 3rd floor of its present site for three years, and the first floor Café Society eatery will be allowed to stay if it is deemed a “tenant in good standing” by the park district’s concession program.

NVVAM board member Jim Holtzman said three legal documents must be completed before the transaction is final: the purchase document between the museum and the City of Chicago, the Chicago Park District authorization transfer document, and the license agreement allowing NVVAM to stay. Once the CPD Board of Commissioners votes, a written agreement must be executed within 180 days.

The agreement with the City became necessary because operating, board, and marketing expenses had left NVVAM in debt. As 2nd Ward Alderman Robert Fioretti explained, "This is not uncommon. I have reviewed their new business plan, which seems strong; this downsizing will give them time to reorganize."

Fioretti added this is a difficult time for many small cultural institutions, whose boards may bring interest—but not necessarily the expertise and experience required for their institutions succeed.

Holtzman said the board is considering expanding NVVAM’s mission to include all veterans so it would have a broader base for fundraising. It also is looking for a better location with more parking.

NVVAM and its restaurant tenant, Café Society, owned by Jorge Armando Afanador, were at odds recently when the restaurant owner accused NVVAM of attempting to evict him and lease his space to the Black Orchid dinner club, which would have paid higher rent.

With Café Society a favorite of locals, the owner successfully rallied support from the neighborhood. Café Society is expected to remain, with a lease that runs until September 2013. Fioretti said both NVVAM and the café "play a necessary role for the community; that is, the museum can play an increasingly essential role in the healing process for the soldiers now returning from Iraq, and the café has become an integral part of and fixture in of the community."

Afanador has built a niche with Café Society by working with neighborhood organizations through donations to nonprofit and senior programs and by providing free soup for the homeless. PDNA’s Ayersman agreed Afanador goes the extra mile for the community.

In an effort to work with the park district, PDNA board member Tina Feinstein said her group is surveying community members about what they may want in their future cultural center; PDNA will present the results to the park district.

According to CPD Communications Manager Jessica Faulkner, the CPD expects the transaction documents to be completed sometime this quarter. Also, CPD has entered discussions with the Department of Children and Youth Services about developing a daycare center at the site.