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## War ends at Veterans Art Museum; site to become community center

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By Susan S. Stevens

A South Loop neighborhood café that counts Mayor Richard M. Daley among its customers is staying, but the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum (NVVAM) is withdrawing to another location after a war over the building's future use.

The Chicago City Council approved a measure June 13 that allows the City of Chicago to reacquire the building at 1801 S. Indiana Ave. that it sold to the NVVAM for \$1 in 1996. The museum tried to sell the building this year in a rent-to-buy deal that would have allowed a nightclub to open and reduce the museum's more than \$500,000 debt.

The City will give the building to the Chicago Park District, which will convert it to a community center and allow the Café Society restaurant to remain on the ground floor.

Alderman Bob Fioretti (2nd) said at a June 19 meeting of the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance (PDNA) that the building could host any number of program possibilities, such as entertainment, exercise programs, and a senior center. PDNA members praised the deal and Fioretti's participation in working it out.

Park officials already are considering what the community center will offer, park district spokeswoman Jessica Faulkner said.

As the community center takes shape, NVVAM will move to other quarters and try to raise money to pay off its debt. Where it will move remains uncertain. One proposed site is adjacent to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Wacker Drive between State Street and Wabash Avenue, said Jerry Kykisz, NVVAM executive director. Meg Givhan, media relations manager of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, confirmed that is a possibility.

The space, which is unoccupied, was developed during Wacker Drive reconstruction and sits on the north side of the street at the level of the river and Lower Wacker Drive.



Giles J. Ortiz

*Café Society owner Jorge Armando-Afanador is happy his restaurant will stay at 1801 S. Indiana Ave.*

“It would be a target destination,” Kykisz said, though he also likes another suggested site at Navy Pier in the space being vacated by the Chicago Children’s Museum.

The City Council acted after NVVAM officials began considering a deal with the Black Orchid Supper Club. Aldermen received 1,200 petitions signed by people who objected to the club.

“The Vietnam Museum cannot sell to a private entity,” said Hanah Jubeh, an aide to Fioretti. “The City has first priority” under the terms of the original agreement when the City turned over the building to the museum. “We want it to be a community center of some sort.”

Tina Feldstein, president of PDNA, said members of her group consider the result a victory. “The residents made it perfectly clear they wanted no nightclub, no supper club.”

The City intended the building to be used for arts, she said, and the Black Orchid would have veered from that mission. Feldstein added neighbors learned about the proposed sale by accident and objected to the noise and increased traffic the club might bring.

“We felt like we could have come up with better bids,” she said. “You would not believe how many people wanted to get their hands on that building,” noting that, in the end, City leaders started thinking about buying it back.

Shortly after Fioretti was sworn in, he met with the veterans and the community to work out an agreement.

“There is no exact date for giving the Park District the building, but it will happen quickly,” Givhan said.

Kykisz is not certain when NVVAM leaders will choose another location or when the institution will move. “There is nothing set in stone,” he said. Feldstein expected the museum to move to the third floor of the current building during restructuring.

The PDNA is anxious for changes to begin, hoping for arts and other classes for children and adults as well as community meetings.

“We envision a center that will highlight the history of the Prairie District,” Feldstein said. “We envision the community participating on a very active level, volunteering.”

She is glad Café Society is staying, and the restaurant’s owner, Jorge Armando-Afanador, is “very happy about it,” he said. “It has been hectic. It has been 11 months with a lot of harassment, problems” that scared away customers. The new deal will not affect his lease, which runs through 2013.

To retire the 11-year-old NVVAM’s debt and increase programming, officials started a national online fundraising campaign June 19 called The Fight for Art at <http://nvvam.org/fightforart>.

“I continue to be amazed at the number of veterans around the country and world who don’t know this museum exists,” said Jim Holtzman, NVVAM treasurer and board member. “We can utilize one of our most efficient resources, our website, to introduce the museum to these veterans and the art community around the world and bring attention to our current situation.”