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Biden is showing his age

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Museum sings for its supper, strikes sour note with neighbors

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BY DAVID ROEDER Sun-Times Columnist

Financial trouble at a Chicago museum is turning into a real estate controversy on the Near South Side. **The National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum**, which opened in 1996 with more than \$1 million in city subsidies, is deep in debt and looking for a way to stay open at 1801 S. Indiana. Its answer thus far: lease part of its space for a catering and banquet facility.

The idea is causing problems with a recently formed civic group, the **Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance**. The organization's treasurer, **Jeffery Ayersman**, forwarded to the Sun-Times e-mails he's sent to the city questioning whether the museum's plans abide by terms of the museum's redevelopment deal. The city gave the museum the roughly 29,000-square-foot building with the requirement that its use remain "compatible with the nature and character of the Prairie Avenue Historic District." Ayersman couldn't be reached for followup questions.

The neighbors are worried that a banquet hall will cause problems with traffic and late-night partygoers. Sources said the museum is negotiating a lease with **Marc Curtis**, owner of the **Black Orchid Supper Club** at 230 W. North. They said it's a seven-year deal with an option to buy.

Matt Keepman, chairman of the museum's board, said no decision on the property is final. But he said the lease would involve only one floor of the four-story building, leaving the rest for the museum. He said that doesn't violate the deal with the city.

Keepman would not confirm a source's account that his organization is more than \$700,000 in debt. "We are looking at all options for the property," he said, adding that none presupposes the museum ceasing to exist.

A source said city officials, concerned about the museum's leadership, have urged it to sell the building to one of several civic-minded buyers, one of whom has an idea for putting more than one small museum into the space. The building has been appraised at \$2.5 million, the source said.

Ayersman also criticized the museum for trying to evict a ground-floor tenant, the Cafe Society restaurant, allegedly to clear the way for the banquet lease. Keepman said the group has started eviction proceedings because of late rental payments.

The Prairie District group organized itself to oppose what it views as intrusive condo towers for the area, so Keepman expressed surprise his museum has become a target. "We're actually trying to do something good for the neighborhood," he said.

HOSPITAL WATCH: **University of Chicago** Vice President **Hank Webber** said the school is a couple of months away from settling on its plan for the old Doctors Hospital at 5800 S. Stony Island. The U. of C. acquired the vacant hospital last September for \$10.1 million.

Under consideration is a hotel and conference center, as well as new space for the business school. Webber said plans have not been determined and it's not known if much of the 1914 building will be torn down. Condos have been ruled out.

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