

6/27/2007 10:00:00 PM

[Email this article](#) • [Print this article](#)

Vets museum goes to Park District

Building to be converted to community center

By HAYLEY GRAHAM, Editor

SOUTH LOOP

The South Loop building that houses the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum is in the process of being handed over to the Chicago Park District, which would relieve the museum of financial troubles and giving a new community center to the neighborhood.

The city's Housing and Real Estate Committee passed an ordinance on June 11 to buy back the museum, located at 1801 S. Indiana, and have the space turned into a community center that would be run in conjunction with Chicago Park District and the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance. While this is a step toward the city taking over building, the future of the museum is still uncertain.

"It is a huge victory for the community," said Tina Feldstein, board president of the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance. "To have the piece of that entity to fall into private hands would have been wrong."

After falling into a reportedly \$600,000 in debt, the museum's board members sought out private investors to rent space in the building. The board eventually tried to set a seven-year lease-to-own lease with an investment group, headed by the owner of the Black Orchid Supper Club, located at 230 W. North. This would have raised money for the museum and allowed the investors to purchase the three-story building when the museum's lease runs out in 2013.

However, this plan did not coincide with strict regulations set in place for the building's usage, which prompted the proposal of the ordinance in early April, giving the city first right of refusal.

Jessica Maxey Faulkner, spokeswoman for the park district, said the turnover is not happening just yet, but "it's going to happen." Over the next couple of months she said the planning process



File photos
South Loop building will be turned into a community center.



will begin.

"We're very excited to have that kind of recreation space in the South Loop," Maxy Faulkner said.

Feldstein said that in August, the museum will temporarily move up to the third floor of the 30,000-square-foot building to make way for the new community center. With a new board in place, the museum will have one year to restructure, which may include broadening its scope to veterans in general in order to serve more people, according to Feldstein.

"We support the veterans and our hope is that they do restructure and that the mission of the veterans does last long into the future," she said.

In the meantime, Feldstein said making repairs and renovations to get the building in good condition is the first order of business. Currently, the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance is working with the Park District to determine what the center will include.

"We will be working with the Park District to build a center that will be very well-rounded and serve the community," Feldstein said.

The budget for the center has not yet been set, but the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance already has established a council for the center and has reached out to residents to find out what they would like to see go in it.

At last week's Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance meeting, some residents said they would like the center to offer activities for senior citizens, art classes for children and yoga classes.

"Everyone is so excited and willing to participate," Feldstein said.

Meanwhile, the city will be working with the museum's board members to find a new possible location. A spot on Navy Pier and across from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial located at the corner of Wacker and Wabash, which would be higher traffic areas, are currently in the mix.

Jennifer Fortney, spokeswoman for the museum, said that while no decision has been finalized, relocating across the Vietnam Veteran's memorial would be ideal.

"The connection is just perfect," Fortney said.

After hearing the news, Jorge Armando, owner of Café Society, who has been in the midst of a legal battle with the museum for several months, said he is finally feeling "peaceful."

"It's better for the Vietnam museum and the Café Society," he said.

Armando opened the small sandwich shop in the lobby of the museum in 2001, and was given an eviction notice in late 2006 for allegedly not paying his rent on time. He then filed a lawsuit contesting the notice, which sparked a series of conflicts between him and the building manager. Armando believed that the museum was trying to force him out before his lease is up in 2013 to make way for the high-end catering service.

CONTACT: hgraham@chicagojournal.com