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Vets Museum could lose exhibit space

City to transfer Prairie
District building to park
district

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The National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum could lose most of its exhibition space under a plan to sell its building to the City of Chicago.

In an effort to save itself from closure due to financial woes, the museum is negotiating to sell its building in the Prairie District to the city, which would transfer the property to the Chicago Park District for \$1. The park district would assume management of the former warehouse, which has been the museum's home since 1996.

The sale would be a stop-gap until the museum can execute long-term plans to expand its repertoire to all veteran artists and move to a location with more foot traffic.



The National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum may lose its exhibit space in the Prairie District.
File photo

After months of talks, the parties are getting close to a deal, a museum official said last week.

In its current form, the deal would only guarantee the museum space on the third floor, said Jim Holtzman, the museum's treasurer and its liaison to the city. Currently, the museum occupies all three floors of the building.

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The museum has 1,500 pieces of art, only about 200 of which are on display at a time. The number of pieces on display would likely be reduced so the park district could use some of the space for its own operations.

The museum, at 1801 S. Indiana, has struggled to attract visitors, in part because the neighborhood has little foot traffic. Mike Helbing, the curator and acting chairman of the museum board, estimated that the museum gets 12,000 to 14,000 visitors a year, mostly school students from around the region.

The Prairie District is also home to the historic Clarke House and the Glessner House Museum, but the area is not considered a big draw for tourists.

The tentative agreement with the park district would give the museum three more years in the current building. Holtzman said the museum will use that time to rebuild itself financially.

The museum also plans to restructure itself and select a new name to reflect its efforts to include more artwork by veterans of all wars. The museum has displayed work inspired by wars other than Vietnam since 2003.

"We would use the third floor for a combination of storage as well as for limited exhibition space until we re-craft a board and we direct ourselves in some of the areas we've been talking about," Holtzman said. "Ultimately, we'll physically move."

The museum and the city have not released details of the proposed deal. According to the museum's Web site, the city gave the property to the museum in 1995.

"[Talks between the city and the museum] are simply going slowly," Holtzman said. "This is the issue of dealing with any large public institution. We're not the first thing they're thinking about, or for that matter the last thing or even the middle thing."

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