



CITY NEWS DESK

Veterans Services (coverage from yesterday's BOS mtg)

Date: 08-19-2014 3:11 PM - Word Count: 564

LOS ANGELES (CNS) - The Board of Supervisors voted today to show their support for a federal court ruling that the Department of Veterans Affairs cannot use land deeded to it for purposes other than veterans.

In August 2013, U.S. District Judge S. James Otero, in response to a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, declared nine VA leases at the West Los Angeles VA campus to be illegal.

Supervisor Michael Antonovich urged his colleagues to send a message to the VA.

“The letter ... sends a strong message that the board supports the veterans and is addressing the critical needs of our homeless veterans,” Antonovich said. “This is an issue that should have come to the board months ago.”

Veterans and their advocates characterized the leases to non-veteran-related businesses and nonprofit groups at the West Los Angeles VA campus as a land grab.

“The issue is the VA land in Westwood that belongs to the veterans,” said Bob Archuleta, chairman of the county's veterans advisory commission. “The VA is not allowed to divert the use for any other purpose.”

Nearly a third of the West Los Angeles campus, the largest medical facility in the VA's national network, is used for other purposes, according to Archuleta.

Those uses deemed illegal include UCLA's baseball stadium, a hotel laundry facility run by Sodexo Marriott Services, vehicle storage for Enterprise Rent-A-Car, a city dog park and oil wells, according to the lawsuit.

Legislation passed in 2007 and championed by Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Beverly Hills banned the Department of Veterans Affairs from selling parcels for private use or allowing commercial development on the Westside campus. Earlier law prohibited commercial development on 109 of 388 acres.

VA officials have said it uses lease income to help pay for veterans' programs. The West Los Angeles VA Medical Center raised between \$28 million and \$40 million via leases or rental sharing agreements between 2000-12, according to an 2012 analysis by National Public Radio.

Those opposed to the leases point to the lack of housing for homeless veterans despite years of promises by the VA.

When service men and women return from duty injured, it is "the very least we can do" to provide housing and medical services for them, said Robert Rosebrock of the Old Veteran's Guard. "It is shameful, simply shameful."

The VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System provides care to 86,000 veterans, with more than 30,000 patient visits per week at a dozen sites in Southern California, according to the agency.

Judge Otero's 2013 ruling stayed enforcement pending appeal by the federal government. The ACLU and VA are currently in mediation and making progress, according to Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky.

While the court ruling would unwind existing leases if enforced, it does nothing to expand services for veterans, which is what ACLU representatives are hoping to negotiate.

Yaroslavsky asked that the letter to Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert McDonald include mention of the board's support for the talks between the VA and ACLU and for expanding housing, medical and mental health care services for veterans.

"The appropriate use of the property is for veterans' services, period, over and out," Yaroslavsky said.