



David Crane/Staff Photographer

Herbert Smith, 54, joins in a chorus of "God Bless America" in front of the Veterans Affairs campus in West L.A. Smith and other veterans fear the federal government will take away more of the property that has served as their home.

Vets' backs to the wall

PROTEST: Federal decision takes land away from home for former military members.

By Sue Doyle
Staff Writer

For more than a century, land at San Vicente and Wilshire boulevards has served as home to disabled and injured veterans, but now a chunk of the 388 acres could become a public park.

The federal decision to take 16 acres from the tree-lined Veterans Affairs campus for public space has sparked anger from veterans, who protested Sunday at the site.

Fearing more of the land — deeded in 1888 to those serving in the armed forces — will eventually be handed to developers or other real estate groups, about 100 veterans launched what they say will be weekly demonstrations in front of the gated facility, which includes a hospital and housing. They want all of the land to permanently remain part of the campus.

"For 120 years, all of this land has belonged to the veterans," said Robert Rosebrock, 65, co-director of We the Vet-

erans, a group providing a voice for those in the armed forces. "Why should it change?"

Rosebrock, an Army veteran, said the public park will be run by the Veterans Park Conservancy, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit created in 1989. Conservancy officials were not available for comment Sunday.

Draping an American flag across the facility's padlocked wrought-iron fence, veterans sang "God Bless America" and then scattered along the busy streets with signs to rally motorists for their cause. Many honked in support.

Outside the facility, some veterans who don't call it home live in campers parked on San Vicente, while others sleep in grungy, urine-smelling blankets on the sidewalk.

Vinny Bellone, 53, wandered the streets after his wife was killed six years ago and then his son died three months later from a drug overdose. Today the Vietnam War veteran lives at the West Los Angeles facility, where he's getting help for post



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traumatic stress disorder.

"You need places like this," he said. "You have thousands of people coming home from Iraq."

Robert Gildow, 56, moved there last year to help with his drug addiction and for complications from a bullet wound in his back he received while serving in the Marines from 1969 to 1984.

"There are a lot of veterans who are homeless," he said. "This place gives them hope."

Two-tour Vietnam veteran Wiley S. Drake, 64, drove up from Buena Park to join in the fight.

"There is nothing wrong with beautifying Brentwood," said the Southern Baptist preacher. "But not with veterans' money."

Don Silver, 58, did not fight in the U.S. military, but on Sunday he protested with the veterans for their cause, saying it is a matter of right and wrong.

"This is a time when we should be fighting for the veterans," said the Los Angeles man. "The land belongs to them."

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Above, veterans in West Los Angeles protest a plan to convert 16 acres at the Veterans Affairs campus into a public park. At right, Henry Papeika of Thousand Oaks makes his feelings clear as he joins in the protest.

