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MEMORIAL BUILDINGS FOR SALE

Old veterans halls fading

County looking to unload, shift focus for often-used, but money-losing, buildings

By BLEYS W. ROSE

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The Santa Rosa Veterans Memorial Building and seven other prominent county-owned buildings will be put up for grabs following a decision Tuesday by supervisors to examine their future.

The aging buildings, which are frequently rented out for social events and group activities, could be sold for housing developments or turned into community service centers.

■ The Santa Rosa Veterans Memorial Building might be replaced by a baseball stadium.

■ The cities of Sebastopol and Cloverdale are eyeing acquisition of veterans buildings in their towns.

■ Facilities in Petaluma and Cotati sit in residential areas, making them attractive for private development of more housing.

Those are some ideas tossed out in an extensive assessment of the deteriorating state of county-owned buildings conducted by the officials with the regional parks and general services departments. Almost 4,700 events occur at these buildings, attracting 352,000 people annually.

Veterans groups, which are guaranteed a memorial under state law, have long been aware that rental fees have not kept pace with rising maintenance costs, said Peter Cameron, executive director of the Vietnam Veterans of America.

"We are aware of the issue and we can understand the cost factor," Cameron said. "The issue of the mounting costs remains the same whether you shift it to the county or the state or have a non-profit take it over."

Veterans may be reluctant to give up access to the buildings, which they booked for nearly 1,000 meetings in the 2003-2004 fiscal year, and may oppose the county's proposals, Cameron said.

"There is a strong feeling about the emotional aspect of having a memorial dedicated to their service," he said.

Supervisor Tim Smith, a Vietnam War veteran, said the coun-

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EIGHT HALLS IN LIMBO



CHAD SURMICK / The Press Democrat

County's veterans buildings

The Santa Rosa Veterans Memorial Building is listed in poor condition while the seven other community halls are considered to be in fair to good condition, according to an extensive county report.

Santa Rosa Vets building

According to the report, a major overhaul of the aging Santa Rosa Veterans Building would cost \$12 million, about half what it would cost to replace it.

The 8-acre parcel could be better used for fairgrounds events or for a baseball stadium, according to the report.

The building is located "in a great place" that might attract developers, said Supervisor Tim Smith, who represents most of the central county.



Cloverdale



Cotati



Guerneville



Occidental



Petaluma



Sebastopol



Sonoma

Photos courtesy Sonoma County

VETERANS: Buildings 'extra important' to communities

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ty is ready to decide whether it should unload any or all of the buildings to nonprofit agencies, cities or private developers that are better positioned to maintain them.

But south county Supervisor Mike Kerns warned that selling the buildings would create a hole in some communities. The Petaluma Veterans Building, he noted, is the largest indoor venue of its kind in town and it often gets used by nonprofit agencies for fund-raising events.

"These buildings are extra important to these communities," Kerns said.

Most of the eight buildings are a half-century old and have become financial albatrosses, according to the county report. It would cost \$19 million to repair them, including \$12 million for a major overhaul of the Santa Rosa Veterans Building.

The 57-year-old Santa Rosa facility is in such poor condition that it isn't worth renovating, the report concludes. The cost of fixing the building is more than half the cost of replacing it.

"The package of work that needs to be done is quite expensive and there is no identifiable source of funding for it," said Robert Kambak, county architect.

The 8-acre parcel could be better used for fairgrounds events or for a baseball stadium, according to the report. Several groups have expressed interest in erecting a minor-league baseball stadium in the area, the report noted.

The Santa Rosa Veterans Building is located "in a great place" that might attract developers, said Smith, who represents most of the central county.

As many as 28 veterans organizations use most of the facilities on a regular basis and they are expected to play a major role in deciding the fate of the buildings, which were built as memorials to their military service.

Under the California Military and Veterans Code, the county can't change the use of veterans buildings unless it either dedicates a substitute facility, gains veterans association approval or veterans groups abandon the facility, as they've done in Guerneville.

About a quarter of bookings at the buildings are for official business meetings of veterans. Nearly half of all bookings are by nonprofit agencies looking for event space. About 230 groups use the buildings on a regular basis, mostly nonprofit groups raising money for programs for seniors, youth or education programs.

Russian River area veterans groups have apparently abandoned use of the Guerneville building, allowing the county to proceed with negotiations with the West County Community Services agency for leas-

WHERE THEY STAND

The status of Sonoma County's veterans memorial buildings:

SANTA ROSA

Built: 1950
Condition: Poor
Repair cost: \$11.9 million
Possible future use: Baseball stadium, fairgrounds expansion

PETALUMA

Built: 1959
Condition: Fair
Repair cost: \$3.2 million
Possible use: Community service center, housing

SEBASTOPOL

Built: 1958
Condition: Fair
Repair cost: \$1.8 million
Possible use: City may buy it

SONOMA

Built: 1952
Condition: Good
Repair cost: \$400,000
Possible use: City might buy it, convention center

CLOVERDALE

Built: 1961
Condition: Good
Repair cost: \$300,000
Possible use: City may buy it

COTATI

Built: 1961
Condition: Fair
Repair cost: \$590,000
Possible use: Housing

GUERNEVILLE

Built: Acquired in 1948
Condition: Fair
Repair cost: \$695,000
Possible use: Community services center

OCCIDENTAL

Built: 1974
Condition: Good
Repair cost: \$225,000
Possible use: Uncertain

Source: Sonoma County Veterans Memorial and Community Center Buildings Report

ing part of that facility. West county Supervisor Mike Reilly said use of the Guerneville building for the agency's social services programs could become a model for use of other veterans buildings.

"Let's not be married to a particular facility or location," Reilly said.

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