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City may expand VA plan

Developments could include state land near grounds

By **TOM DAYKIN**
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Posted: Oct. 11, 2005

A technology-oriented business park and other developments planned for 37 acres at Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center on Milwaukee's west side could grow beyond the initial proposal, Mayor Tom Barrett said Tuesday.

Advertisement The proposed developments at the VA grounds, west of Miller Park Way and north of W. National Ave., could encompass around 100 acres, including state-owned land adjacent to the grounds, Barrett and other city officials said.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has asked city officials to create a comprehensive redevelopment plan for the property. The Department of City Development hopes to submit that plan within two months, Barrett said.

City officials plan to seek a long-term lease for 37 acres of surplus property at the VA grounds. Barrett said he envisions a business park that targets companies involved in medical research. The business park would seek to create partnerships among companies, the medical center and area universities and colleges.

Barrett said the business park's buildings could total around 1 million square feet. By comparison, GE Healthcare offices under construction at the Milwaukee County Research Park in Wauwatosa would total just more than 500,000 square feet, with 2,100 employees, when they open in February.

The VA grounds also would house America's Freedom Center, an interactive education center that would feature displays on military conflicts dating to the Revolutionary War.

A non-profit group will try to raise around \$30 million for the center, which would include a new 50,000-square-foot building, along with the restored Ward Memorial Theatre, built in 1883

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as part of the original Soldiers Home complex.

That fund-raising effort will focus on federal grants, as well as contributions from corporations and foundations nationwide, to avoid tapping out Milwaukee-area contributors, said Lillian Boese, who is helping lead that campaign.

Finally, the city's plan would include a new parking structure, which would bring parking closer to the hospital and open parking lots for new development; new streets, water mains, sewer lines and other improvements; and the restoration of several historic buildings that make up the 19th-century Soldiers Home.

Some of those historic buildings could be renovated into offices, which would be added to the business park, Barrett and city Development Commissioner Rocky Marcoux said. Any such renovations would be sensitive to the historic nature of the buildings, said Barrett, Marcoux and Ald. Michael Murphy, whose district includes the VA grounds.

State-owned land at the northwest corner of Miller Park Way and National Ave. also could be developed as part of the business park, Barrett and Marcoux said. That vacant land was set aside for the canceled Stadium Freeway project.

If VA officials approve the city's plan, the Common Council and Barrett could create a tax incremental financing district to pay for the parking structure and other improvements, which would pave the way for the business park. In such a district, the city would borrow money to finance the improvements, with that debt paid off through property taxes generated by new development.

"It started out as a dream," Barrett said about the proposal. "It's still a dream. But it's a dream within our reach."

From the Oct. 12, 2005, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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