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## Editorial: A wise use for VA grounds

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From the Journal Sentinel

Posted: Oct. 11, 2005

Although thousands of miles and cultures apart, China and the Veterans Administration grounds on Milwaukee's west side have something very much in common - potential for future jobs and economic development for a city and a region that need both if they are going to thrive.

*Advertisement*

Enter Mayor Tom Barrett, who, only days before he leaves for China to lead a trade mission there, was at the VA grounds Tuesday to announce plans by the city to seek a long-term lease for 37 acres of surplus federal property for a biomedical and technology business park the city hopes to develop. We've been critical in the past, asking the mayor to be more proactive in terms of economic development. With this project and in other endeavors, he is doing precisely that.

In June, Barrett and Rocky Marcoux, the city's commissioner of development, traveled to meet with the secretary of veterans affairs, to discuss the city's plans. VA officials have since asked the city to prepare a formal offer to lease and redevelop the property. Marcoux said Tuesday he is optimistic with the way the negotiations are going.

The site would be a natural for a technology-oriented park. It already houses the Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center, with its research capabilities and affiliation with the Medical College of Wisconsin. It also boasts a central location, just off I-94, a campus-like setting and a number of architecturally significant and historically important Civil War-era buildings. One of them, the National Soldiers Home, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

In fact, the city's plans call for housing on the grounds America's Freedom Center, a national museum and education center presenting the history of military conflicts and diplomatic efforts preserving the nation's freedoms. With the historic nature of the grounds, the center would be an ideal fit.

Marcoux said that if the deal goes through - and by all means it should - the city would act as the master developer for the site. The city would work with others in the community to develop a comprehensive plan for more than 100 acres of the property, including creation of a tax incremental financing district to pay for improvements to the grounds, including roads and a

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parking structure. The biomedical and technology park would provide roughly 1 million square feet of land to lease for research faculties, in part by building the garage next to the Veterans Affairs Center to open up land now devoted to surface parking.

In addition to providing space for larger firms, Marcoux said, the city hopes to provide start-up labs at the research park to help incubate small but promising young companies. A terrific idea.

The model would be the Milwaukee County Research Park in Wauwatosa, and city officials hope they could provide additional space at the VA grounds for technical firms that run out of space at the county research park only several miles west.

This has all the makings of a win-win, showcasing and honoring the past while building a better future. We urge the federal government to approve the lease.

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