

June 24, 2014

Vets respond with anger to VA announcement of \$1.5M 'master plan' for troubled West LA campus



A sign outside the Wadsworth Theater on the VA's West Los Angeles Campus announces a town hall meeting introducing the long-awaited "Master Plan" process to the public. JOHN ISMAY/ KPCC

By John Ismay

A town hall by Department of Veterans Affairs officials to introduce the three private contractors who will write a new "master plan" for the troubled West Los Angeles campus turned into a shouting match Tuesday night as local vets complained angrily at the pace and cost of reforms coming to the 600-acre site.

Wednesday night's event was scheduled for 90 minutes, but ran for nearly 2 hours as a series of local veterans refused to cede the floor during the question and answer session. Many vets argued their concerns won't be addressed in the redevelopment plan.

"You really don't want to blow smoke at us, because we've been smoked before, man." said Joe Adamski, of a group called Veteran Advocacy Services.

The agency told the several dozen attendees it will pay Hellmuth, Obata, Kassabaum Inc., the Walsh Group, and Core Companies \$1.5 million to develop a development plan for the Brentwood property. The final planning document will be released in October.

"One point five million dollars for five months to just talk around a table?" audience member Charlotte Rules said during the meeting.

"I mean the Amish put up a barn in one day," she added. "Do we need to get the Amish here to build a big square rectangle [shelter] to get relief for homeless and disabled people who are on the street? Because the Amish would be a lot cheaper than all of you. And they would do it, and they would do it with spirit and heart and happily."

VA special assistant Vince Kane apologized to the contractors for the question and answer period having turned to issues of homelessness instead of being a discussion of the master plan itself.

The teams' selection had been announced June 8th, but this was the first public meeting on the plan since then.

The plan to change the campus arose from a lawsuit brought by homeless veterans who claimed the VA campus had gone off course from its mission of serving as a veterans' home. The last one closed in the 1970s and since then the VA leased some of the land out to several businesses.

When the lawsuit was settled in January 2015, the VA made a 100-Day Pledge to make progress on reform. It outlined 13 goals, but the VA only met 12 of them before Memorial Day -- the hundredth day. The agency was unable to house 650 vets in the month of April, as promised, instead housing only about 200.

The biggest issue on minds of many veterans at the Tuesday night meeting seemed to be the derelict chapel located just off Wilshire Boulevard, which has been shuttered for over 30 years. Nowhere in the VA's presentation was the chapel mentioned, but officials later claimed that the chapel will be renovated and reopened to the public.

Others vets complained about a lack of emergency shelter for homeless veterans. Many wanted tents set up on the campus' Grand Lawn to get homeless vets off the street as soon as possible -- instead of waiting for housing vouchers or the construction of new housing units.

"If anyone wants to go out the back gate of Sawtelle and under the bridge there, y'know, and you want to help a veteran? Stop by and help a veteran - first, ok?" Adamski said, pointing to the 405 overpass where homeless vets often congregate. "Then we'll build 'em housing. Get 'em off the streets."

Homelessness advocates had raised that possibility of a "tent city" in recent months. But officials Wednesday said that was a non-starter.

"The community researchers, social scientists, -- everybody -- is very clear: the solution to ending homelessness is 'housing with services.' It's not these other temporary solutions like shelters," Kane, of the VA, said after the meeting. "Those don't really end homelessness; they put a temporary band-aid on homelessness."

As part of the process, the three contractors will collect data on veteran homelessness, and will analyze whether they think January's count of 4,362 homeless vets in Los Angeles County is correct. The bi-annual count is conducted by the county, which sends an army of volunteers to go out and find homeless sleeping on the streets, under overpasses and in ravines.

VA officials could not provide a target for how many units of housing they need to build on the campus, but said it wouldn't be anywhere near 4,000 because they only intend to house homeless veterans requiring 24-hour a day care on the campus.

They plan to distribute housing vouchers to the rest, so they can rent their own apartments.

The VA in Long Beach, Calif., has had some success placing vets into supportive housing, but said rising rents are making it hard to finding a place to live for all vets holding vouchers. In Los Angeles, Christine Margiotta of the United Way's Home For Good LA program has said that the "the major barrier" to getting vets housed is a "lack of willing landlords" who will take them.

As for the leases of VA land to outside companies - which sparked the lawsuit to begin with - the VA still appears to be honoring them, at least for now. A private school bus company and Mazda of Santa Monica are two of the businesses using the property and officials made no mention Wednesday night as to when they intend to move them off the land.

A federal judge in 2013 ruled that the VA can't enter into those leases because the land was deeded to the government strictly for use by veterans. That ruling led to the settlement.

COMMENT:



helenofpeel

This is atrocious. The vets are right. With soaring rents in LA the vouchers will be next to useless. Create barracks. The vets know the routine. You can house thousands of vets and provide services. This is really egregious that the VA is wasting time and lives.