

County envisions community built around veterans

Housing agency buys land for a project dependent on relocating the city's VA services

By **MIKE SNYDER**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

In an unusual venture for a public housing agency, the Harris County Housing Authority has purchased a 91-acre site on Lake Houston where it plans to develop a veteran-themed community of homes, businesses and patriotic memorials the agency

hopes will attract visitors. The \$165 million project, known as Patriots by the Lake, is contingent on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs relocating offices and other facilities from the Texas Medical Center to the Lake Houston site, providing \$9.2 million in annual lease payments that would help to finance the development.

While a local VA official expressed enthusiasm about the plan, it can't proceed without the approval of the agency's national leadership, which the housing authority hopes to secure in May.

The project, to be built



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over four years, would include about 160 subsidized apartments for the elderly and more than 600 market-rate town homes and single-family houses, a nursing home and other facilities for veterans and their families, a community center, a ho-

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LAND ARCHITECTS

ARTIST'S RENDERING: Patriots by the Lake would provide mixed-income housing close to VA services, but the community would be open to anyone. It would also include memorials to soldiers.

VETS: Advocate says plan strays from aiding poor

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tel, shops, restaurants and 13 memorials, such as a replica of the iconic Iwo Jima flag-raising sculpture.

A key feature would be a black granite wall with laser-inscribed images of soldiers killed in action.

As thousands of veterans return to the Houston area from Afghanistan and Iraq, this development would be a way of thanking them for their service while providing housing close to VA services, including a hospice and clinic, said Guy Rankin, the housing authority's chief executive.

"We wanted to do it in a grand way to celebrate and honor the courage of our troops," Rankin said.

For example, some of the apartments in the development could be equipped for blind veterans who could participate in a rehabilitation program offered at the site, said E.A. "Buddy" Grantham, director of the mayor's veterans' affairs office.

Although the site is far from the VA Medical Center, he said, most veterans using the services in the development wouldn't need routine access to the hospital.

Low-income housing advocates, however, said the

project was a questionable use of a public housing agency's resources at a time when many families struggle to afford decent housing.

A 'Disneyland' for vets?

John Henneberger, co-director of the Texas Low-Income Housing Information Service, an Austin-based advocacy group, said public housing agencies increasingly are diversifying into entrepreneurial ventures that stray from their traditional mission of housing the poor.

"There's a whole lot of poor people out there, and there's a whole lot of housing needs out there," Henneberger said. "I would question the need for them to be creating a sort of Disneyland for veterans."

Rankin said the project is consistent with federal housing policies, which emphasize creating mixed-income communities rather than concentrating the poor into developments that often become slums.

He noted that Patriots by the Lake wouldn't require any local tax dollars. The housing authority bought the land using \$6.5 million of the \$15 million in fees it earned from administering disaster hous-

ing programs for hurricane evacuees outside the Houston area.

While the housing in the new development would be available to anyone, Rankin said, veterans would be a natural market because the project would include the VA offices and other services for veterans.

Carlos Escobar, associate director of Houston's Michael E. DeBaakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center, said moving the administrative offices and other facilities to the Lake Houston site would free up space for a needed expansion of the hospital.

"If we can make this happen, I think it will be a state-of-the-art project that I don't believe exists in the United States right now," Escobar said.

David Jarvis, director of the Houston office of the real estate research firm Metrostudy, said the strong northeast Houston housing market and good schools in the area bode well for the project.

"I think people would want to live in a planned development like the one you're describing," Jarvis said.

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