

It's a matter of preservation

June 05, 2012 10:30 am • [By Curt Nettinga](#)

HOT SPRINGS – When the VA Black Hills Health Care System was presented its National Landmark plaque last week, it marked the end of one struggle of nationally recognizing the historic significance of what began as the Battle Mountain Sanitarium in 1907.

The next day, Thursday, a long-awaited Section 106 meeting took place, the first step of the next process that began when the VA proposed the closing of part of its current campus.

Jennifer Buddenborg, an officer with the National Trust of Historic Preservation (NTHP) has worked with the Save the VA Campaign as it assembles its counterproposal, attended both meetings.

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation act of 1966 requires federal agencies to take into account the effects of plans and proposals on historically significant properties, plus allow time for historical preservation organizations time to comment.

“Overall,” Budd-enborg said, “I thought the meeting brought out a lot of good discussion involving concerns over the proposal. What was the most impressive was the amount of knowledge that was in the room, about the steps of compliance that are required.”

She said that attendees included representatives of the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation, the Deputy Preservation Officer for Department of Veterans Affairs, the State Historic Preservation office, as well as representatives from all three congressional delegates and both local and national representatives from the National Parks Service.

Buddenborg said that the National Landmark designation received on Wednesday differs from the National Treasure recognition offered by the NTHP.

“National Land-marks are the most historically significant sites in the country and have gone through rigorous state and national reviews,” she said.

As Vidal Davila noted at Wednesday’s ceremony, there are only 2,500 National Landmarks.

“Our National Treasure is more of a program whose intent is to identify nationally significant historic sites that are threatened in some way.”

She said that then the NTHP uses its resources and partnerships to devise a strategy to save the site for the future.

“Battle Mountain Sanitarium is one of the first 22 such sites we identified.”

Buddenborg said that her agency works with the federal government, with state governments or historical groups and other local groups, such as the Save the VA group.

“Really any group interested in preservation,” she said.

She noted that recently the NTHP worked with the Parks Service in setting up White Grass Dude Ranch at Jackson Hole, Wyo., as a site for Parks employees to study preservation of historic structures.

“Our objective in this instance is to prevent the closure and abandonment Battle Mountain Sanitarium,” Buddenborg said.

“Our preference would be for the VA to continue providing medical services at the facility.”

She realizes that other factors enter into the discussion but added that the NTHP feels the VA should look at other options.

“And they have not done that,” Buddenborg said. “They haven’t done their due diligence or supplied documents to support their claims. In fact, it was apparent that the people at the meeting were not up to speed on what was required under federal law.”

She said that there were many questions posed to the VA representatives that they were unable to answer and that she was surprised that the people with whom she has been speaking to from the VA did not attend the meeting.

Buddenborg said that the majority of those in attendance supported keeping the VA service at Battle Mountain Sanitarium.

“Most everyone wanted it to not close,” she said. “Jay Vogt, the director of the South Dakota State Historical Society and State Historic Preservation Officer said it was kind of strange not being the only person working for preservation. He said that this time everyone was on his side.”

She said that the NTHP has worked with the VA before on preservation, notably at the VA in Leavenworth, Kan.

“They wanted to destroy historic buildings to expand the National Cemetery. We worked with the local group and came up with a different idea, involving separate land, which the city donated, for the cemetery.”

She said the buildings were saved and many have been renovated to be used by VA personnel.

While the Battle Mountain Sanitarium was among the first sites designated as a National Treasure, Buddenborg said that 11 more sites will be announced on Wednesday, June 6.

“We’re announcing our 11 most endangered historic places,” she said. “These are places that are not yet National Treasures.” At the same time a new NTHP website for the National Treasure sites - www.savingplaces.org - will kick off June 6 as well.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/it-s-a-matter-of-preservation/article_03f2da86-ae6c-11e1-91a0-001a4bcf887a.html

Opinion - Roberta Williams

June 05, 2012 10:30 am

To the Editor:

It has been my intention to publicly acknowledge the outstanding effort by the Steering Committee for the Save the VA effort. Our community is absolutely indebted to their continuing efforts to insure that the VA, the veterans it serves, and the Hot Springs area continue to have the benefits that this institution brings to all these entities.

I particularly want to commend the Steering Committee for the outstanding job of coordinating the meeting in April, when our Washington representatives were here to research the VA's proposal. The excellent speakers and their concise, knowledgeable deliveries on valid topics seemed to be specifically directed toward those things that the representative would need to hear. And it would have been the Steering Committee who was responsible for shaping that response from the speakers.

It was gratifying to see the high school students there. Our young people received an excellent example of democracy in progress. They often hear critical and cynical ranting about our government and the processes of our government, but what a fine example of how our way of government should really work: reasoned discourse by knowledgeable people, received with respectful acknowledgement of those thoughts.

The work of this Committee is continuing. Thank you for all you are doing.

Roberta Williams

Hot Springs

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/opinion---roberta-williams/article_a9a954bc-ae64-11e1-a401-001a4bcf887a.html

Communities unite at Powwow



June 11, 2012 5:00 pm • [Text and photo essay by William Ing](#)

PINE RIDGE - Traditional Lakota life is based on affinity: living in harmony with others, having a sense of belonging in one's community, valuing interpersonal relationships, and trusting one another. They believe resources should be freely shared among people, in times of good and bad. Sharing is not just limited to possessions; it also extends to the sharing of emotions such as sympathy, compassion, understanding, and kindness; and the sharing of personal time.

When the Lakota veterans brought their families and horses into Hot Springs on Feb. 25 to help in the efforts to save the Hot Springs VA Medical Center by riding in the Veterans Ride, they were sharing resources "from their hearts."

In that same spirit of affinity, the community of Hot Springs chose to honor the Native American veterans by sponsoring an evening meal and wopila, or give-away, at the 24th annual Veterans Powwow in Pine Ridge on Saturday.

Scores of Hot Springs residents and businesses worked together to contribute food for the supper and dozens of laundry baskets overflowing with gifts for the more than 1,000 adults and children in attendance. Additionally, a separate presentation of 18 special gifts honored the Lakota organizers of the Feb. 25 Veterans Ride in Hot Springs as well as several individuals who played important roles in its success.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/communities-unite-at-powwow/article_c367f00e-b402-11e1-94ca-0019bb2963f4.html

VA releases financial analysis on future proposals

June 13, 2012 5:30 pm • [By Curt Nettinga](#)

HOT SPRINGS – The long-awaited financial analysis of the (VA) Black Hills Health Care System was released last week, and stated, that “the most effective capital cost option for improving Veterans’ access to high quality health care services in this region is to build new facilities, rather than renovate...”

Since BHHCS submitted its proposal in December, to further limit its footprint in Hot Springs, the financial analysis of the proposal had been requested – first by the Save the VA Campaign and later by the South Dakota Congressional Delegation.

During a conference call to answer questions, BHHCS director Steve DiStasio noted that the operating cost analysis had been completed by the VISN 23 Chief Financial Officer Chris Stomberg, as it related to the proposal, although cost estimates for renovating buildings on the Hot Springs campus were included.

“We have always stated our main focus is on providing access to safe, high quality care, closer to veterans’ homes,” DiStasio said. “This financial analysis complements that by demonstrating good stewardship of taxpayers’ dollars.”

The action proposed by the VA included construction of a new Community Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Hot Springs, while the Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program (RRTP), now conducted at the Domiciliary in Hot Springs, would move to a new facility in Rapid City. Four alternatives are included in the ‘low cost’ portion of the document, all of which have a new Multi-Specialty Outpatient Clinic in Rapid City.

“This analysis is much overdue and should have been completed before the VA presented its proposal in December,” said Senator Tim Johnson in a statement. “I look forward to the Save the VA group presenting its proposal in the coming weeks and expect that (proposal) to receive a fair analysis. There remains a lot of questions and issues that need to be worked out by the VA, and I will continue to press the VA for concrete answers.”

“My office and I have been working with the Hot Springs Save the VA Steering Committee to review the analysis for any flaws or invalid assumptions,” said Senator John Thune. “I will work with the residents of Hot Springs to make sure the VA responds to any questions or concerns they may have. I will also closely monitor the financial analysis of the counter proposal.”

"While it too far too long to produce, I am pleased that the VA has finally responded to our requests for a cost benefit analysis," said Representative Kristi Noem. "I am still reviewing the analysis, and I believe there will be some counterproposals when the public comment period ends at the end of this month. The delegation has been assured that no final decision has been

made and I will continue to make sure this process and any decisions remain transparent and are made with the best interest of our veterans in mind."

The Capital Cost Analysis shows that the proposal would come with an estimated price tag in excess of \$148.6 million, the lowest alternative shown in the document, for Alternative 1A, the action described above. Alternative 1a(1) is identical, with the exception of leasing space in Hot Springs for a CBOC. This alternative is slightly higher, at \$149.3 million.

Alternatives that include construction of either a 100-bed RRTP in Hot Springs (\$168.2 million) or a 24-bed RRTP in Hot Springs and a 76-bed unit in Rapid City (\$176 million) are also listed as lower cost alternatives.

A 22-page executive summary, giving the highlights of both the Capital Cost Analysis and the Operating Cost analysis can be found on the BHHCS web site:

www.blackhills.va.gov/VABlackHillsFuture/VA_Black_Hills_Financial_Analysis.pdf.

DiStasio also referenced a more detailed, 85-page document supporting the summary, although the more document was not made available upon request.

The independent capital cost analysis was completed by Jones Lang LaSalle, who DiStasio said was a leading real estate financial services provider. The capital costs are associated with the construction, renovation, leasing and maintenance of the buildings and their utilities.

"This analysis is a natural part of the process of determining the future of veterans' health care," DiStasio said. He said it is not unusual to hear criticism of numbers and that people were "either for it or against it," when asked how he would respond to people who find that the financial data supports the position of the VA in its proposal.

"We moved it from here to where it could be independently done," he added.

He said that the comment period on the original proposal will end June 30, but that if there is a different proposal put together the VA would be more than willing to work with any group if they need more time.

"I understand through conversation and through the media that the Save the VA group in Hot Springs has a proposal that they nearly have completed," DiStasio said. "I look forward to sitting down with them and going through it."

He added that it is likely that other people may have very good ideas on how best to proceed and that everything will be considered.

A spokesperson for the Save the VA Campaign said that the group does have a proposal completed and will be setting a roll-out date soon to present it to the people of Hot Springs.

DiStasio said a realistic time line could have new proposals integrated with the current document, having a financial analysis done on the combined proposals. "Later this summer, I am

thinking July or August we would make a plan that would then be sent to Washington, D.C. for approval.”

He said that any plan of action would need to be funded before it could move forward.

The operating cost analysis shows that if the proposal moves forward, BHHCS could see an annual cost savings of more than \$26 million, most of which would come through a reduction in full time employees – from 1,063 to 799 – reducing costs by more than \$20 million. A \$5 million savings on supplies and materials is balanced by a similar increase in spending on purchased care in the community. DiStasio said that the VA had met with Fall River Health Services “a couple times” but that no further meetings had been planned, until a final proposal is drafted.

“We expect through attrition in our employee workforce to lower the number of our FTEs,” DiStasio said. “We are excited about retraining our employees for other service, or having them move to a different federal agency.”

He added that the operating cost analysis includes money for the maintenance and upkeep of the Hot Springs campus, should the original proposal materialize. With its recent designation as a National Landmark and National Treasure, the VA is responsible for maintaining the buildings in their current condition.

When asked about the possibility of building a new domiciliary in Hot Springs, DiStasio said that it would depend on the footprint of the building. “I don’t know if we have the acreage to build in Hot Springs,” he said. “We’re certainly not going tear down the buildings for new construction, they’re National Landmarks. Once we know what we want then we look at square footage, as well as partnerships with other agencies, such as the State Veterans Home.”

DiStasio said that it was his hope that the buildings would be utilized, by the VA, by Hot Springs or by the state of South Dakota. He mentioned a school use, perhaps office space or even a place to securely store records.

He said that the VA has no land in Rapid City at this time and is not in a position to even make a request for funds yet.

“We can’t proceed without a plan,” he said.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/va-releases-financial-analysis-on-future-proposals/article_0cd5ae60-b5a3-11e1-89a1-0019bb2963f4.html

Save the VA group questions data

June 15, 2012 8:12 am

The Save the VA committee appreciates the delivery of the long awaited cost analysis conducted by the VA consultants. It would have been helpful to have had those numbers at the time the original VA proposal was made.

However, the analysis just released is not the end of the story. The analysis is based on a number of assumptions that we have questioned in the past and continue to question. We are surprised the VA proposals are as high as they are. We are convinced that our proposal will provide an option for better veterans' care at less cost. The Save the VA proposal takes veterans services in new directions and will change the nature of this discussion.

Our goal has always been to first focus on the well being of the veteran in addition to the impact on our community if the Hot Springs facility is closed.

Before the end of this month the Save the VA committee will release its proposal, which we are confident will demonstrate a larger vision for the future of our nation's commitment to veterans care. We have been constructing this proposal with our continuing focus on the quality of care, what we believe will be a growing need for specialized treatment for veterans in the future, and cost effectiveness.

Our plan is to share our vision with the VA administration at the local, regional, and national level concurrently with making our proposal public. We hope that through our proposal we can begin charting a new course for the delivery of veterans care not only in Hot Springs and the Black Hills, but also nationally.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/save-the-va-group-questions-data/article_49b674d4-b6f4-11e1-978e-001a4bcf887a.html

EDITORIAL: VA study needs to be countered



June 17, 2012 8:30 am

It's not a surprise that an economic analysis by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs of the Black Hills Health Care System's restructuring plan found that it would save money and be more efficient.

What is surprising is that the VA would propose a major restructuring of the Black Hills Health Care System without an economic analysis in the first place.

The proposal would close the VA medical center in Hot Springs, build an outpatient center there and in Rapid City, and a 100-bed residential rehabilitation treatment facility in Rapid City.

Pulling out of Hot Springs would devastate the self-styled "veterans town," and the fact that the VA announced plans to do so without first analyzing the move as led many Hot Springs residents to question the VA proposal and its motives.

It was only because of pressure from the public and South Dakota's congressional delegation that the VA did an economic analysis.

It shouldn't be a surprise that the VA's analysis of its own plan provides justification for the restructuring. However, it wouldn't be out of the question for an independent audit of the VA's economic analysis. Recall that the Affordable Care Act was promoted as necessary to reduce the deficit; a Congressional Budget Office analysis earlier this year found that the 10-year cost of the federal health care law was \$2.5 trillion.

Now that the VA has finally done its due diligence and provided an economic rationale for its restructuring move, groups opposed to the plan, such as Hot Springs' Save the VA, have a benchmark from which to propose a counter-argument.

Hot Springs Mayor Don De Vries said the Save the VA organization will release its alternative plan soon.

Steve DiStasio, director of VA Black Hills Health Care System, said he welcomes a discussion of alternatives to their proposal, and that other ideas may be incorporated into the final plan. “I want to have a dialogue with whomever is coming forth with alternative proposals,” DiStasio said. “We might then reframe the proposal including these new ideas.”

When the Pentagon’s Base Closing and Realignment Commission proposed closing Ellsworth Air Force Base in 2005, it was justified as a cost-saving to the Defense Department. Rapid City and the state of South Dakota presented counter-arguments that justified keeping the base open despite the additional cost of having two B-1 bomber bases.

We have noted before that the VA is not short of money; its budget has increased more than 250 percent in the past 10 years from \$52 billion in 2002 to \$132 billion in 2012.

If Hot Springs is going to succeed in saving its VA medical center, it needs to submit a better economic model and provide an irrefutable argument for keeping the VA in Hot Springs that goes beyond lower health care costs.

Health care for veterans is not just about saving money; it’s about providing the best health care and easy access to treatment that the federal government has promised to give our veterans.

That’s something that Hot Springs and the VA medical center there has done for this nation’s veterans for more than a century. It would be a shame to suddenly end that partnership.

Today's topic

THE ISSUE: Department of Veterans Affairs releases economic analysis of Black Hills VA restructuring.

OUR VIEW: If Hots Springs VA center is to be saved, a better argument has to be submitted to counter the VA's analysis.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/opinion/editorial-va-study-needs-to-be-counterred/article_f2514c1c-745e-5a1f-ad73-802b7039802f.html

(S.D.) - Save the VA committee plans proposal release

By: John Thayer Posted at: 06/25/2012 06:55 AM

HOT SPRINGS - The Save the VA Campaign central committee has scheduled a town hall type meeting, to reveal the details of the group's proposal for retaining the health care services for area veterans.

The meeting is set to begin at 7 p.m. on Saturday, June 30, at the Mueller Civic Center in Hot Springs.

All are invited to listen to the proposal that has been crafted from the work of more than a dozen different volunteer committees, in response to a proposal delivered Dec. 12, 2011, by VA Black Hills Health Care System director Steve DiStasio and Veterans Integrated Services Network 23 director Janet Murphy.

The VA's Dec. 12 proposal calls for the closure of the Hot Springs VA Medical Center, construction of a Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Hot Springs, moving the PTSD and Substance Abuse therapies accomplished at the Domiciliary in Hot Springs to a new site in Rapid City and contracting for services such as pharmacy, lab work and x-ray with Fall River Hospital.

<http://www.chadrad.com/newsstory.cfm?story=25072>

[Residents release their own proposal to save Hot Springs VA](http://www.blackhillsfox.com/2012/07/01/Residents-release-their-own-proposal-to-save-Hot-Springs-VA)

Saturday, 30 June 2012 20:34

In December 2011, the Veterans Administration announced a proposal to move certain services of the Hot Springs VA Hospital out of the Southern Hills town and into Fort Meade and Rapid City. Since then, Hot Springs residents and supporters of the town's VA have scrambled to draft a counter proposal. Saturday night, at a town hall meeting, details of that counter-proposal were announced. Members of the Hot Springs "Save the VA Campaign" say more than 200 volunteers have been working since December to come up with an alternative measure to keep the town's VA hospital in service. They say their new counter-proposal will reshape the V-A into a national demonstration project. One component of the plan that will create a not-for-profit corporation to oversee a company they call Veterans Industries. Counter-proposal co-author Rich Gross says, "This will be a for-profit industry that we will use for compensated work therapy that we will use to provide jobs for underemployed and unemployed veterans in the area, and I think the key to that piece of it is that 75% of the profits made by the industry will be returned to the VA to help offset treatment costs." Gross says another facet of the proposal would call for the Hot Springs VA to be used as a research facility for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Gross says, "We plan on having bi-annual conferences. We plan on publishing white papers. We plan on working with the VA as a partner in conducting research, especially with our Native American populations." Gross says he believes by including both the for-profit and not-for-profit components into the plan, this new proposal will save taxpayers about \$49-million over a 30 year period when compared to the V-A's original plan. Hot Springs Mayor, Don DeVries says if today's counter proposal is adopted, it would provide an overall net gain for the Southern Hills community. DeVries says, "It's huge when you try to compare, instead of losing 335 jobs in a town of 3700, we might pick up another 50 or 75 or 100 jobs, so it's huge." Drafters of the counter-proposal say the next step is to hold discussions with regional VA officials. They hope the plan will ultimately make its way to the Secretary of the VA. Brendyn Medina

<http://www.blackhillsfox.com/2012/07/01/Residents-release-their-own-proposal-to-save-Hot-Springs-VA>