

Panel will present uses for Bywater naval site - Group wants facility to aid development

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An 18-month study to recommend uses for a 25-acre federally owned site in Bywater is nearing a conclusion, though exactly what it will suggest remains in question.

The New Orleans Advisory Task Force, the group charged by law with developing plans for reusing the soon-to-be-vacated Naval Support Activity-East Bank site on Poland Avenue, must submit its recommendations to Mayor Ray Nagin and the City Council by the end of January.

The task force will present ideas for use of the site at a public meeting tonight at 6:30 p.m. at the Ellis Marsalis Jazz Studio in the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, 2800 Chartres St.

The group, whose focus has been on finding ways the site can be used to contribute to the city's economic development, plans to hold a final public meeting Jan. 12 before submitting its report to Nagin and the council.

After those officials have a chance to review it, the report must be presented to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Defense Department by March 31.

The report's recommendations will largely determine how the federal government ends up conveying the land to new owners, either public or private.

Belinda Little-Wood, a city economic development official who serves as staff director of the advisory task force, said the site could be used as a technical school to train workers for the medical and biomedical fields.

Although a group of consultants working for the New Orleans Building Corp., another city agency, suggested last year that the Bywater site would be ideal for mid- and high-rise residential buildings, Little-Wood said that housing does not appear likely to be a major focus of the task force's recommendations.

The group is likely to recommend reserving part of the site for parking for a cruise ship terminal that the Port of New Orleans wants to build nearby. It may also suggest using part of the site for neighborhood businesses.

The Naval Support Activity tract between Poland Avenue and the Industrial Canal has been home to a succession of military organizations.

The base was built in 1919 for the Army Quartermaster Corps. During World War II, it was an Army deployment hub known as the New Orleans Port of Embarkation. It functioned as an Army base until 1966, when it was transferred to the Navy and became the Naval Support Activity.

With the site's current tenants, the Naval Reserve and Marine Corps Reserve commands, due to complete moving out by September 2011, the Defense Department has designated the base as surplus.

But before any decisions on the site's future ownership and use can be made, federal law mandates a complex planning process that includes, among other things, soliciting proposals for use of all or part of the site by organizations that work with the homeless and other public interest groups.

Unity for the Homeless, a collaborative of local groups serving the homeless, has asked for use of a relatively small part of the site, Little-Wood said.

The Naval Support Activity site contains three six-floor office buildings totaling 1.6 million square feet, including 1 million square feet of air-conditioned office space. The base also offers 1,800 parking spaces, including 1,100 spaces in one of the three buildings, plus two basketball courts, a tennis court, other recreation facilities and a parade ground.

Two of the buildings are eligible for historic designation, meaning developers could get historic preservation tax credits as well as new markets tax credits for redeveloping them, Little-Wood said. The report may suggest demolishing the third building.

The cost of remediating the old buildings to remove asbestos and lead-based paint would be only about \$3 million, meaning it would not be a major deterrent to reusing the buildings, Little-Wood said.

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For information about the advisory task force and federal guidelines for redeveloping surplus military bases, visit the city's Web site, www.cityofno.com, and click on "NOATF" under "Departments and Agencies." Bruce Egger can be reached at beegger@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3320.

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