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## City sees new uses for old site

### Historic buildings could become offices as part of business park plan

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A large 19th-century building that was once home to disabled Civil War veterans could find new life as part of a city plan to redevelop part of the VA grounds.

That building - which is now empty and faces an uncertain future - is among 25 historic structures making up the 19th-century Soldiers Home complex located on the grounds of the Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

The most prominent building is Old Main, the original Soldiers Home that opened in 1869 atop a hill that now overlooks Miller Park.

Old Main's six-story tower can be seen by motorists passing by on nearby I-94. Its central location, west of Miller Park Way between I-94 and National Ave., makes it a good candidate for commercial redevelopment, perhaps as office space, said William Bonifas, senior vice president at Polacheck Co. commercial real estate brokerage.

"It's a fabulous location," agreed Tom Gale, a principal at Equity Commercial Real Estate LLC, a newly launched brokerage.

Mayor Tom Barrett said this week the city wants to lease surplus land at the VA grounds from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to develop up to 1 million square feet of new office buildings targeting technology businesses. The business park would try to create partnerships among companies, the VA medical center and area universities and colleges.

Those preliminary plans also would include the restoration of Old Main and other historic buildings.

Some of those historic buildings could be renovated into office space, which would be part of the business park, Barrett and city Development Commissioner Rocky Marcoux said. There also could be apartments or condominiums created within the historic buildings, Marcoux said.

The renovations would be sensitive to the historic nature of the buildings, city officials say. Marcoux said it was premature to discuss more detailed ideas because city officials will first talk with preservationists and others before submitting a comprehensive plan to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In addition to Old Main, with nearly 134,000 square feet, the historic buildings include another former residence hall with nearly 104,000 square feet. The other buildings are generally much smaller.

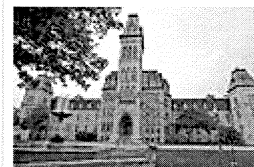
### Not a new idea

#### New Uses for VA Site



*Photo/Tom Lynn*

The Soldiers Home complex contains a historic collection of buildings, including this one, built in 1879. Parts of the complex were constructed to house disabled Civil War veterans.



*Photo/Tom Lynn*

Old Main may be the most recognizable building of the 25 historic structures at the Soldiers Home complex on the grounds of the Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center. It was built in 1869, and comprises nearly 134,000 square feet.

Locally there is a precedent for converting older buildings into space for high-tech firms.

A former Wauwatosa hospital, which opened in 1914, was redeveloped in 1993 into a business incubator at the Milwaukee County Research Park. The technology business park is bordered by Highway 45, Mayfair Road, Watertown Plank Road and Wisconsin Ave.

The building, which previously served as a tuberculosis sanitarium and later a mental asylum, now houses more than 40 small, tech-oriented firms. Some of the tenants have grown from the incubator to larger offices, including some at the 175-acre research park.

The incubator, known as the Technology Innovation Center, appeals to start-up firms because it includes lab space, conference rooms and other features that are shared among the tenants, helping keep down their rent.

Also, the incubator's businesses and other companies at the research park benefit from partnership opportunities by being near the Medical College of Wisconsin and other medical institutions.

The five-story Technology Innovation Center has 31,000 square feet available for lease, said Guy Mascari, the research park's marketing director.

The park itself has 28 acres left to sell for new development, he said, and owners of buildings separate from the incubator collectively have around 80,000 square feet of space available for lease.

Mascari said the park has an 8% vacancy rate for its available office space. The overall vacancy rate for office space in the Milwaukee area was 16% at the end of 2004, according to Polachek Co.

Assuming there is enough market demand for additional tech-oriented space, the business park planned for the VA grounds could complement the research park, Mascari said, rather than compete with it.

## The preservation issue

However, plans for redeveloping Old Main and other historic buildings into commercial space might be opposed by preservationists.

Finding new uses for the buildings, many of which are empty or used for storage, could help prevent their deterioration, said Kristin Gilpatrick, president of the Soldiers Home Foundation Inc., a non-profit group seeking to raise money to preserve the buildings.

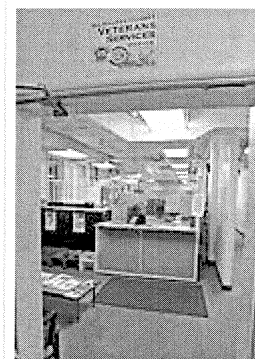
But any new uses need to protect the historic integrity and veteran legacy of all the buildings, which are within a 90-acre national historic district, Gilpatrick said. She noted that the buildings are adjacent to Wood National Cemetery, a burial ground for veterans.

"We look at the buildings as an extension of the cemetery," Gilpatrick said. "The cemetery is where they're buried. But the buildings are where they lived.

"We do understand you have to be practical," she said. "But where does the veteran legacy stop? And who determines that?"

Preservationists supported one recent redevelopment project: the conversion of a former residence for doctors, built in 1887, into a 13-bed shelter for homeless people, including veterans.

The 10,600-square-foot shelter, financed with a \$572,000 federal grant and \$500,000 in city Housing Authority funds, opened this summer.



Photo/Tom Lynn

The Milwaukee County Veterans Services office is located at the Soldiers Home complex on the VA grounds. The city has a plan to turn part of the land into a business park.

### Quotable

“ It’s a fabulous location. ”

- Tom Gale, principal,  
Equity Commercial  
Real Estate

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Other conversion projects could qualify for federal and state historic preservation tax credits, Marcoux said. Those credits are given to developers who restore buildings according to federal preservation standards. They are often used to help finance such projects, which are typically much more expensive than constructing new buildings.

The city also could create a tax incremental financing district for the VA grounds project, which would include a new parking structure to free up hospital parking lots to be used as building sites.

With the district, the city would borrow money to build the parking structure and make other improvements. Property taxes generated by new development would pay off that debt.

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