

# P1 Vets

## 40 Inches aprx

By GORDON BOCK

The Northfield News and Transcript

The Mayo-DeLary House on Vine Street, once host to Northfield's town hospital and for more than three decades a group home for senior citizens, could soon become a haven for homeless military veterans.

Members of an organization calling itself the Veterans Place Inc. were finalizing a grant application Monday seeking funds for a veterans facility that would be located in the vacant two-story Victorian building at 220 and 222 Vine Street. Among those spearheading the effort is Jack McDermott of Moretown, a member of the governor's Veterans Advisory Council.

"Do I know about it?" Mr. McDermott asked Friday when reached for comment on the proposed plan to house perhaps a dozen or more homeless vets in the historic dwelling, which shares a fenced property line with the Northfield Middle/High School. "I'm one of the guys who has been pushing most vigorously for this thing."

Mr. McDermott, who was then rushing between meetings that dealt with the fund-raising effort for the project, declined further comment both Sunday and Monday when reached for additional details at his prior request.

He said that the Veterans Place board, the names of whose members Mr. McDermott declined to identify, decided over the weekend not to disclose anything about the proposed venture until their grant application was submitted.

However, an e-mail sent to members of Washington County's state legislative delegation last week by Sandy Combs of the Veterans Place group confirmed that the organization "signed a letter of intent to purchase" the Mayo-DeLary property "for our homeless veterans' transitional housing facility."

The Mayo-DeLary site, shown on the grand list for Northfield as having an assessed valuation of \$561,750, is currently owned by Mayo Healthcare Inc.

Christine Scott, administrator at Mayo Healthcare, said that her company last week signed a purchase-and-sale agreement with the Veterans Place group. Miss Scott

said that she could not disclose the selling price.

It was not immediately clear whether the Veterans Place group met a Monday deadline for submission of the grant proposal.

Also sketchy was the question of what possible legal or regulatory hurdles the group may have to meet to bring its plan to fruition. As of Tuesday, no applications for construction permits or variances for the Vine Street property had been submitted to Northfield's zoning administrator. Nor had the property changed hands, Town Clerk Kim Pombar said.

Ken Johnson, a member of the town Selectboard, said that he heard talk of a homeless veterans' project for the Mayo-DeLary House but was unaware of the matter being on the agenda for any coming Selectboard meetings. Jim Wilson, chairman of the village's Board of Trustees, said that nothing about Mayo-DeLary House, which is part of Northfield Village, has been scheduled for the board's consideration.

A resolution passed Friday by the Vermont House of Representatives gave some insight into what the Veterans Place group hopes to accomplish for the Mayo-DeLary site. House Resolution 32, passed on a vote of 134-0 (with 15 House members absent), spoke of the pressing need for "a multi-service transitional housing facility for 15 or more central Vermont veterans, to be located in central Vermont, that would provide housing, food, legal services, dental care, job-seeking support, substance-abuse counseling, clothing and personal hygiene assistance" to homeless veterans.

The House resolution originally named "Barre or Montpelier" as the site of the veterans' facility but was amended at the request of Rep. Patricia McDonald, R-Berlin, to say "central Vermont." It was unclear when Northfield became the preferred location for a facility aiding veterans in transition.

Veterans Place moved at a whirlwind pace in securing the purchase-and-sale agreement with Mayo Healthcare. On Monday, March 31, Mayo Healthcare's Miss Scott received a phone call from the group, members of which visited the Mayo-DeLary site the next day. In all, she said, the group took tours of five possible sites for the project in a six-day period. By Wednesday, April 2, negotiations resulted in an agreement struck late that day.

Did the speed of the deal surprise Miss Scott?

"Nothing surprises me," she said. "They really liked the house. It has an incredible amount of charm and it's in good shape."

If the plan for the Mayo-DeLary site takes root, it would be aimed at addressing challenges posed by the nation's homelessness problem, which acutely affects more than 180,000 U.S. military veterans. A study reported last year by the Associated Press estimated that more than 744,000 people in the United States were homeless as of 2005. Veterans comprise about 25 percent of the nation's homeless population, according to the House resolution.

There are at least 150 homeless veterans in Vermont, 30 or so of whom reside in central Vermont, the resolution said. Sponsors of the resolution wrote that only one residential facility in Vermont, Dodge House in Rutland, currently administers specifically to this group's needs.

Although Mr. McDermott and his Veterans Place colleagues would not disclose details, the House resolution gave some insight into their fund-raising efforts. According to it, Veterans Place had to raise \$200,000 by last Friday, at which point the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs was prepared to award a grant of an additional \$600,000 for the project.

The House measure stated that the governing body of Barre's Hedding United Methodist Church, under the leadership of the Rev. Ralph Howe, had donated \$10,000 toward the \$200,000 goal. It was unclear whether the Veterans Place group managed to raise the other \$190,000 needed to qualify for the federal grant. Mr. Howe did not return a message left on his voicemail Friday.

Efforts by Veterans Place to secure state funding apparently proved unsuccessful. According to the resolution, Vermont lawmakers were "unable to support this project financially due to the tight fiscal constraints" of the current state budget.

This prompted a sharp rebuke from Rep. Mary Morrissey, R-Bennington, during debate over the non-binding resolution on the House floor.

"Wording on a piece of paper is cheap," the lawmaker said, according to the House Journal as published on the Legislature's web site.

"We had an opportunity to truly support our homeless veterans through this initiative by putting our money where our mouth is during this week's budget discussion, and failed to do so."

The white-painted Mayo-DeLary building, two stories of living space with an attic and a sweeping front porch, has a rich history spanning more than 150 years. Built in 1854 by carpenter Thomas Houston for doctors who used it as a treatment center, the home became a tea room under the care of Mary Christmas beginning in 1927, according to Miss Scott. It has also been the residence of Northfield physician William Mayo.

After Cordelia DeLary bought the property, she changed it into a hospital setting in 1936, Miss Scott said. The site subsequently operated for about 30 years as a group residential care home, which was licensed to house up to 26 people when Mayo Healthcare announced in April 2007 that it would close the facility by last summer because of high costs of maintenance and upkeep.

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