

Hard road ahead for RTC vet center

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If the city of Fergus Falls decides to push ahead in an effort to turn the Kirkbride building on the Regional Treatment Center into a veteran rehabilitation center, it will have an uphill battle ahead.

That was the message city staff, council members and the public heard at a Monday night work session for the project from Terry Scherling. Scherling is the president and CEO of TENICA and Associates, the city's consulting firm on the proposed center. However, Scherling added, she believes there is hope.

To begin the hour and a half session, Scherling told her audience that she grew up in a rural North Dakota area near Fargo and not too far away from Fergus Falls.

"I actually played softball when I was in high school on the grounds of the Kirkbride," she said.

With her area experience, she said, she wanted to approach the project with an idea of how local government would get the project done rather than how someone from Washington, D.C. would do it.

Over the last few months, TENICA has been taking a hard look at the possibility of installing an "upper Midwest disabled veterans family reintegration and therapeutic care command" into the existing Kirkbride building. The center, which could serve both veterans and active duty service members, could house injured service members or service members suffering from mental illness and help them reintegrate into society or active duty.

On the positive side of the project, Scherling said that the building of such a center would fulfill an unquantifiable but certainly real need to provide care that addresses veterans' immediate needs, like employment, health, drug use, and relational problems. If such needs are located and dealt with early, she explained, it is less likely that destructive consequences like suicide, crime or homelessness will occur.

With that in mind, and with the acknowledgment that "I don't mean to shape (the project) in front of your eyes," Scherling laid out a possible framework for the center. It would be oriented toward keeping families near the veteran, allowing both the injured person and the family to have a sort of "time out" from the stresses of everyday life while also allowing them to begin reintegrating into society through getting employment training or going back to school.

The center could also cast a very wide net in the range of services it provides, serving people with mental and physical health needs in a variety of ways. Some ways Scherling mentioned included chronic pain management treatment or possibly even a retirement community for veterans who would eventually transfer over to the veterans' home in the city.

"I'm suggesting that it be across the spectrum," Scherling said.

Though she was optimistic, Scherling recognized that the project was faced with very definite problems.

“Sometimes we say it’s like pushing spaghetti uphill,” she told the audience.

The primary problem is funding. Construction and renovation on the property would likely be funded either through a partnership with an existing foundation with goals similar to the Fergus Falls veterans center or by the city starting its own foundation to solicit funding. While Jeff Schlossman, a lead advocate of the center and one of the development partners with CDG, the group working on developing other parts of the RTC, was hopeful that the city’s own foundation could pay for construction, the larger funding question is what will happen once the structure is built.

Essentially, Scherling explained, it is likely that Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense will not fund the continued operation of a veterans center in the city. Instead, the center would primarily get by on money supplied to it by the health care providers of the center’s patients.

“It’s almost going to vary with every person that’s there,” Scherling told the Journal.

However, she mentioned that a recent study commissioned by President Barack Obama has called for a more holistic governmental approach to veteran and family care, meaning that further funding sources could be available in the future.

In the audience were many members of Mayor Hal Leland’s RTC task force, and many of them expressed that while they thought the center was a good idea, its goals and its purposes needed to be better defined.

John Skillingstad, administrator of the Minnesota Veterans Home, was particularly skeptical.

“If there’s not a funding source, it’s all pipe dreams,” he said.

Larry Schultz, CEO of Lake Region Healthcare, agreed.

“It sounds like there’s a lot of work to be done to line up ... where those funds would come from,” he said.

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