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Archives may anchor Great Park

Officials at federal document depository consider moving and expanding to create museum at former home of Marine base.

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THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER
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IRVINE - A West Coast museum branch of the National Archives may open as early as late 2011 in the Great Park, according to an update by officials Thursday.

That means the future park is getting closer to displaying Chuck Yeager's flight notes, documents from the Spanish land grants and Greta Garbo's application to become a U.S. citizen.

All those and millions more papers are part of the trove of records, pictures, maps and documents at the regional National Archives depository in Laguna Niguel.

Archives officials are working to find money to move into a building that would anchor the planned museum district in the Great Park, the mix of wilderness areas, athletic fields, museums, schools, shops, houses and farms proposed for the land once occupied by the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station.

Master designer Ken Smith has said the museum would be a "prestigious institution to have as an anchor" for the park.

Great Park directors Thursday expressed excitement about the Archives move.

The National Archives' Southern California home is in the Chet Holifield Building – more commonly called the Ziggurat in Laguna Niguel because of its stepped-pyramid architectural style. The Archives occupies about 35,000 square feet.

Officials would like room to grow in a new building, so they are envisioning about 50,000 square feet at the Great Park – about the size of an average grocery store.

National Archives officials have been looking for years for a more accessible location than the Ziggurat. Among other federal tenants, that building houses the Internal Revenue Service, which doesn't tend to draw visitors – at least not willingly.

The National Archives' main repository is in Washington, but it operates regional centers in Anchorage, Alaska; Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Denver, Fort Worth, Kansas City, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle and St. Louis.

But the Great Park facility could become the Archives' best-known museum west of Washington, D.C., said Thomas Mills, assistant archivist for regional records service.

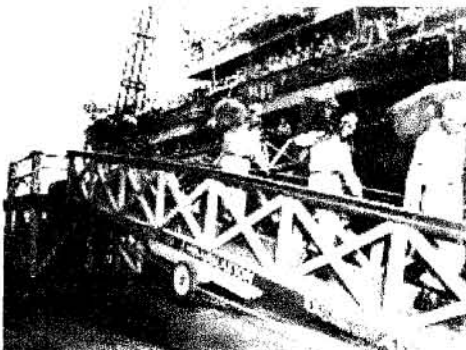
Mills said the building would focus on providing informative and interesting exhibits to visitors and students.

"For us the project represents a shift from document storage to a museum," Mills said.

The 50 million documents at the National Archives center in Laguna Niguel include:

- Chuck Yeager's notes from his sound-barrier-breaking flight.
- Early records from El Toro.
- Papers from the arrival of Vietnamese refugees to the United States.
- Land records from Spanish colonial times.
- Files on Chinese immigration to the United States.

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Servicemen disembarking from a troop transport in Los Angeles, after serving in the Pacific Theater during World War II.

Image from the National Archives Pacific Region in Laguna Niguel

NEXT STEPS

Present-March 2009: Refinement of museum plans, including funding and design.

March-December 2009: National Archives sets up to lease land for the museum from the Great Park Corp.

January 2010-June 2011: Museum construction.

October 2011: West Coast Archives opens to public.

SOURCE: National Archives