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Tustin hangar has chance for new life

Development company plans to turn hangar into park space.

By ELYSSE JAMES
STAFF WRITER

The future of two military hangars was uncertain after the Tustin Marine air base closed in the late 1990s. Now, one faces demolition while the other may become a sports park.

The hangars, built in 1942, housed blimps during World War II. In later years, the hangars housed helicopters and were used to film movies. Both hangars are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Thomas Messmer, a 10-year Tustin resident and vice president of the development company IRG, is heading plans to turn the north base hangar into an indoor-outdoor park with baseball and soccer fields, at least one ice rink, a waterfall that cascades down all three planned levels and a Vietnam War veteran display.

Messmer's plan, which he's been working on for about five years with partner Bruce Haas, also a Tustin resident, would be partially funded by private interests, including companies that could have retail space at the hangar. IRG, he said, works to "bring existing buildings back to life."

Mayor Jerry Amante said that when he was a councilman, residents would tell him he had to preserve the hangar. But, he said, they didn't want to be taxed to pay for its restoration or upkeep.

IRG recognizes how daunting the task is and they aren't daunted, Amante said.

"I tell a lot of people that if I didn't live in Tustin and didn't feel so strongly about this I maybe would have gotten discouraged," Messmer said.

"The city is really behind this. It gives us a very good feeling," Messmer said.

Proposals to save and restore the south hangar were rejected in 2007 by the City Council because of lack of funding, including a proposal for a veteran's museum that focuses on the site's history. The south hangar eventually will be torn down and the land used for Tustin Legacy, a project that houses parks, schools, businesses and homes at the old base.

When the land is given to Tustin Legacy the south hangar will be torn down, Amante said. Right now, the history of both hangars is being documented and people who were involved with the base are being interviewed, he said.

Models of the two hangars will eventually be placed at Tustin Legacy, but the south hangar will remain until its history is fully documented, Amante said.

Messmer declined to name companies interested in the north hangar, but said they are people who own and operate ice rinks, sports franchises and recreational equipment retailers.

Plans for the north hangar won't be put in place for at least 18 months, Messmer said. And it could take longer. IRG must gain National Park Service approval of the project, which it plans to do this summer. Then, more traffic and utility studies must be done and more detailed architectural drawings created. The Navy could then give the land to Orange County, and IRG will lease the land.

Tustin and Orange County must also approve any further plans. Also, the hangar must be restored and space saved for a county animal shelter.

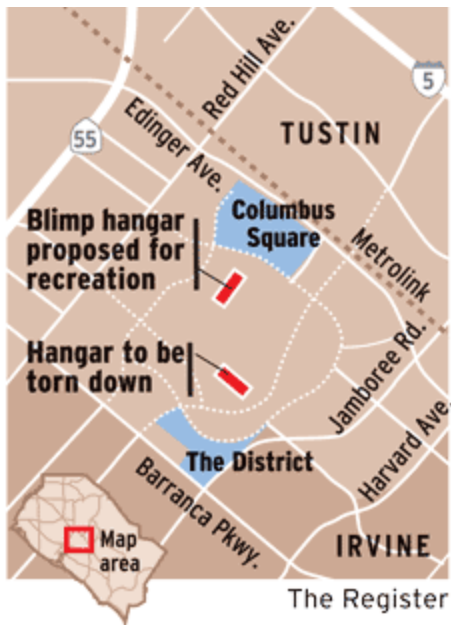
Messmer said the hangar began to have personal meaning when he worked closely with veterans and started understanding its history. He's been in the hangar about 12 times.

"From an architectural and construction standpoint it's a real wonder," Messmer said.



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