

Public Comments Environmental Scoping for VAMC Building # 2

Public comments were received during the public comment period extending from 28 May through 26 June, 2009. The public provided comments by submitting emails and letters. All comments were reviewed and those pertinent to the environmental scoping of the project are summarized below. Every attempt has been made to adequately respond to these comments and incorporate them into the Site-Specific Environmental Assessment (SEA). Public involvement in development of this SEA is discussed in Section 1.3 of the SEA.

Alternatives

Approximately 33% of the comments related to alternatives:

- Additional alternatives should be considered:
 - Lease of existing parking lots or empty lots in New Orleans for installation of the medical support units.
 - Use of existing open space or interiors of other buildings on the New Orleans Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) campus for installation of the medical support units.

RESPONSE:

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) remains under intense public, Congressional, and oversight scrutiny in regards to reprocessing of instruments and scopes used in hospitals and clinics during patient procedures. A Congressional Hearing was held on 16 June 2009 at which representatives from the Office of the Inspector General and VHA officials were called to testify. The Office of the Inspector General presented findings to assess the VHA's compliance with applicable regulations regarding sterilization, storage and reprocessing of instruments, airflow of rooms where decontamination occurs, and the competency of the staff performing the decontamination and sterilization procedures in VHA facilities. The findings that were presented were not favorable to the VHA. As a result, the VHA has been tasked with initiating more stringent measures to assure that United States veterans are receiving safe procedures utilizing properly cleaned and sterilized instruments and equipment. To fulfill this mission, management must ensure that all VHA directives, recent memorandums requiring action, manufacturers instructions, locally developed, device-specific, standard operating procedures, training, competency assessment documentation, and space and airflow requirements are all in place. Failure to provide these requirements will significantly lead to issues of patient safety, infection control concerns, and risk management ramifications to this ongoing problem.

- The demolition of Building # 2 is needed to provide a site adjacent to existing VA clinic space to house portable/mobile buildings which will provide space to support Supply Processing & Distribution (SPD). SPD orders, maintains, and delivers medical supplies and has organizational responsibility for sterilization of medical instruments and scopes. There is no open space available on the VAMC campus suitable for situating the mobile support units.
- SPD functions are typically done within a medical center setting because effective operation requires proximal location to the medical services. This includes housing sterile products (i.e. gauze, bandages, instruments, etc.) and decontamination of instruments which are used in clinical procedures. In the case of Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System (SLVHCS), locations that require these direct services are the Urgent Care Center and the Primary and Specialty Care Units Clinics at 1601 Perdido.
- SPD functions are currently housed in two locations; clean medical supplies are stored in a warehouse in Harahan, LA (9 miles from the New Orleans clinic) and the cleaning/decontamination of reusable medical equipment is conducted in two small rooms in the Urgent Care Clinic on the existing VA campus.
- An Office of the Inspector General report on recent incidents nationwide at VA facilities has prompted the publication of VA Directive 2009-031 which includes strict guidelines and environmental controls to minimize risk to our veterans.
- Subsequent audits of SLVHCS SPD concluded that the existing clean supply storage facility is too far away from clinical activity. Also, the decontamination area on site is deficient in space to accomplish the necessary cleaning requirements and separations as mandated by the new VA Directive 2009-031.
- Currently, there is no space available within usable buildings that comprise the SLVHCS that are proximate to the Urgent Care Center and New Orleans clinic for compliance with new mandates. Modification/renovation of the existing New Orleans VAMC facility was considered but eliminated from further consideration. Hurricane Katrina caused extensive damage to the VAMC facility rendering the existing facility unacceptable for continued use as a medical facility. Mold control is an ongoing problem. VA's *Report to Congress on Plans for Re-establishing a VA Medical Center in New Orleans* states that "Reuse of the existing complex may be acceptable for a non-medical facility but not for a hospital with patients susceptible to infection." The report goes on to state that "The options addressing the existing facility are deemed too risky for future patient care and are unacceptable [to] the Department" (VA 2006).

- Immediately after Hurricane Katrina, SLVHCS began looking for leasing opportunities that are both proximate to New Orleans operations and appropriate for the intended function. SLVHCS continues to look for suitable property but no available locations have been identified within an acceptable distance (a 5 minute walk) of the VAMC campus. The placement of SPD functions in modular buildings at the existing Building # 2 site is the alternative that can best meet the critical needs for patient care.

This information has been incorporated into SEA Section 1.1 Purpose and Need to more fully describe the detailed project objectives and requirements including the necessity of proximity to the outpatient clinic. Additionally, Section 2.2 Alternatives Considered and Eliminated from Detailed Analysis was modified to include Section 2.2.4 Leasing a Vacant Lot or Parking Lot.

NEPA Public Participation

Approximately 31% of the comments focused on the process used for soliciting public comments:

- Methods of notification were inadequate.
- Email notifications about the NEPA environmental process were not distributed through the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 consultation process.
- Request extension of the public comment period.

RESPONSE:

On 28 May 2009, three avenues of public notification were utilized to distribute information about the availability of the Draft SEA, the public comment period, and the 26 June 2009 closing date of the comment period. The Notice of Availability (NOA) for the Draft SEA was published in *The Times-Picayune* on page A-11. Additionally, the NOA was distributed to all individuals who provided contact information at the public meetings held in relation to the Tier I and Tier II process. The NOA was delivered via email to those individuals who provided their email address, while a hardcopy version was distributed to individuals who provided a complete mailing address. In the email distribution, individual email addresses were suppressed due to concerns regarding privacy of individuals. Also, on 28 May 2009, the project website (<http://valsumedcenters.com>) was updated to include a copy of the Draft SEA, NOA, and the closing date for comments.

While we appreciate your comments as they pertain to notification through the NHPA Section 106 process; Ms. Coyle's e-mails to the consulting parties during the Tier I

process were provided as a courtesy, not a requirement of NEPA. Through our extensive activities associated with the Programmatic EA for Site-Selection and other activities associated with the VAMC project, mailing lists of interested parties were developed and we chose to provide notification of NEPA document availability through these channels for this new project without adding an unnecessary burden on our NHPA subcontractor. This e-mail distribution on 28 May included a subject heading that clearly identified the topic as “Notice of Availability VAMC Building #2 SEA.”

The VA believes that the notification which was provided regarding the availability of the Draft SEA for Building #2 was more than adequate. VA accepted additional comments submitted after the deadline.

Impact on New Orleans Medical Historic District (NOHMD)

Approximately 18% of the comments related to the impact on the NOMHD in general or on specific buildings within the NOMHD. These comments are summarized below:

- Loss of a contributing element to the NOMHD is significant.
- Demolition of a historic structure to install a “temporary parking lot” constitutes a significant impact.
- Concern over the impact of demolition and vibration on the neighboring Sister Stanislaus building.
- Suggested need for more consideration of vibration impacts, especially to the Sister Stanislaus building.

RESPONSE:

In consultation with Federal, State, and local agencies, tribes, and organizations per the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) regulations for implementing NHPA Section 106, VA identified the following mitigation measures to reduce potential adverse impacts on historic resources. These measures are currently under review through the NHPA Section 106 consultation process and are described in brief in Section 5.0 and in detail in the Draft Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), which can be found in full in appendix B of the Draft SEA.

- **Effects to the NOMHD:** VAMC Building #2 is a contributing element to the NOMHD; however, it is not a lynchpin element, and its’ demolition is not anticipated to threaten the eligibility of the district itself.
- **Recordation Treatment Measure:** To reduce adverse impacts on the historic property resulting from demolition, VA would document the former VA Hospital and the VA Managers and Nurses Quarters (Building # 2) on the existing campus. The recordation would include digital photography (to capture all elevations and character-defining architectural features) and narrative histories as described in

Appendix B of the MOA. VA would post the resulting recordation data and materials to the project website for the VAMC Replacement Project for consulting parties and the public.

- **Public Interpretation:** Should Alternative # 2: Demolition of Building # 2 and Mobilization, Installation, and Setup of Mobile Support Units be selected, VA, in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), would design and implement a future public interpretation program related to history of the VAMC, including Building # 2. This program could include oral histories, museum quality permanent displays, traveling exhibits, a publicly accessible website, and popular publications. The public interpretation program plan and resulting materials would be posted for comment by the consulting parties. VAMC would finalize and then implement the public interpretation program after considering the comments.
- **Sister Stanislaus Vibration Concerns:** Although the specific method of demolition would be determined by the contractor, it is anticipated that a wrecking ball or high reach demolition excavator would be used to take down the exterior structure of Building # 2. The VA has determined that due to the close proximity of other structures, most specifically Sister Stanislaus, controlled demolition by implosion is not a viable option for this project. The contractor will develop a demolition plan and select a demolition methodology that will minimize the risk of potential damage to Sister Stanislaus and to the elevated walkway.

Undetermined Future Use of the Existing VAMC

Approximately 13% of the comments related to the currently undetermined future use of the existing VAMC and the impact demolition of Building # 2 may have on that future use. These comments are summarized below:

- How does demolition of Building # 2 impact the MOU between VA and the City of New Orleans regarding possible transfer of ownership of the VAMC following completion of the replacement VAMC.
- Determination of a long-term reuse and revitalization of the area must be determined before any demolition occurs.

RESPONSE:

VA will comply with NEPA and NHPA requirements when evaluating options for disposition of the existing facility. However, no action related to disposition will occur

for several years – the new VAMC facility must be designed and constructed before the existing building is evacuated.

The existing campus of the VAMC remains under the direct control of VA pending notification from the City of New Orleans that it has completed all of its obligations under the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between VA and the City of New Orleans as signed on 19 November 2007 and amended on 19 November 2008, and the City indicates it is prepared to transfer the Tulane/Gravier site to VA control. The MOU between VA and the City of New Orleans puts forward three options for transfer of the Tulane/Gravier site to VA control. Two of these options involve either a direct property transfer or a lease arrangement which would place the existing VAMC campus either wholly or partially under the control of the City. However, the third option allows VA and the City to work out other lease terms and conditions solely focused on the Tulane/Gravier site. The MOU is not definitive regarding whether the existing VAMC will be transferred to the City. An environmental assessment will be conducted to evaluate the alternatives for the final disposition of the existing VAMC.

Determination of a long-term reuse and revitalization of the area surrounding the existing VAMC campus is outside of the scope of VA's role in New Orleans. VA must determine the most effective allocation of assets to best serve its role in providing health care to veterans located in southeastern Louisiana.

Miscellaneous

Approximately 5% of the comments related to transportation issues in conjunction with the New Orleans Master Plan. These comments are summarized below:

- **Master Plan & Traffic Circulation:** Removal of the neighboring I-10 overpass as described in the New Orleans Master Plan will produce significant changes in traffic circulation which should be evaluated and included.
- **Land Use:** Installation of the mobile units would not “reactivate” the site or contribute to revitalization of the immediate area, especially considering the temporary nature of the intended units.

RESPONSE:

Master Plan & Traffic Circulation: The Draft New Orleans Master Plan proposes removing the I-10 overpass that is located to the northwest of the existing VAMC campus. The Master Plan has not been finalized and once it is officially adopted it will likely be several years before the final disposition of the overpass is determined. Therefore, temporary road closures for demolition activities and installation of the mobile support units would be unlikely to have a cumulative impact in conjunction with the Master Plan's proposed removal of the I-10 overpass.

Land Use: Section 3.3.2 has been modified to remove references to possible indirect benefits to the surrounding area as a result of reactivation of a portion of the VAMC campus.