

SANTA CRUZ

Veterans Council argues over site

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Veterans
In suit, group says
new spot worsens
access to service

By Kurtis Alexander
Santa Cruz Sentinel

A mile and a quarter from the shut-down Veterans Memorial Building, a handful of county employees are trying to provide vets the benefits they deserve. Maneuvering out of office space at the county's Emeline Avenue campus, the staff helps with pension claims, job assistance and counseling.

Local veterans groups, however, say service at the new site is coming up short.

"There's a phone on the wall. It says call and leave a message and we'll make you an appointment. (Previously) you could walk in and they might say we can't meet with you now but at least there was a face," said Dennis Murawsky, a Vietnam vet who lives in Santa Cruz. "This is not the introduction to the veterans' services we want."

Monday, attorneys for the United Veterans Council of Santa Cruz County and the county government squared off in court over whether veterans are receiving adequate accommodation in the wake of the Vets Hall closure in January.

The county-owned hall, which housed not only a veterans services office but a theater and meeting space, was closed indefinitely in January when county leaders deemed it seismically unsound. That left the county the legal obligation of providing alternative space, which the Veterans Council, in a lawsuit filed in April, claims has not been done sufficiently.

County attorney David Brick argued Monday that the county has "stepped up to the plate," offering the same 8,000 square feet of space veterans enjoyed downtown at the new site. Offices used by county health and social service em-

ployees, adjacent to where the veterans services are now provided, will be cleared to make way for veterans' activities, Brick said, and veterans also will get use of county-owned meeting space and the downtown Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium.

But Ralph Boroff, representing the United Veterans Council, argued not only were these facilities inadequate but the location was bad.

"Members of our service group don't have the ability to move about as freely as some," Boroff said, noting the accessibility that came with the downtown location.

Boroff also lamented the

lack of a kitchen, social areas and radio room that were important to many of the veterans groups making up the Veterans Council.

County leaders have estimated repair of the veterans building will cost \$1.4 million, a sum they don't have and could be years from acquiring.

The dispute also was central to cancellation of the Thanksgiving community meal in Santa Cruz, which veterans groups have put on for 24 years. Subsequently, another group has come forward and plans to host the meal at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium on Thanksgiving.

The Veterans Council initially had argued that closing the building went overboard, citing an independent review and asking a judge to reopen the hall. That request has so far been denied, and the group has turned its attentions to addressing problems at the new site.

"We've tried to meet our obligation," said county Supervisor Neal Coonerty, who represents the city of Santa Cruz on the board of supervisors. "But I guess the court will have to decide."

Attorneys for the county and the Veterans Council say the case could wrap up this week.