

REPORTS & COMMENT

Red Tape

Veterans 10-23-86 GT

Vets Vow To Hold Front Street

AFTER laying their lives on the line on battlefields around the world, the members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Bill Motto Post 5888 didn't expect they'd have to come home to another fight with the county about where they would be allowed to hang their dusty helmets. But that's what has been happening for the past three years — and it looks like a judge will have to settle the dispute next Wednesday.

The dispute is all about which party — the county or the veterans — should have control over use of the historic Veterans Memorial Building on Front Street, commonly known as Vets Hall.

The veterans, represented by the United Veterans Council and the Bill Motto post, claim a legal, traditional and moral right to use the building, specifically Room 23 (a large chunk of the second story) as their office headquarters.

The county, legally entrusted with the "care, operation, scheduling, security, maintenance and use" of the building, would like to use Room 23 and other space within the building for purposes which might generate revenue for the county.

Unless attorneys can come to terms this week, which seems unlikely, the matter will be decided in Superior Court Oct. 29. The county has filed a countersuit to a suit filed by the veterans about a year ago.

At issue will be wording in sections of the Military & Veterans Code, and a proclamation of county supervisors in 1930 (the building was erected in 1932); each side has a different interpretation of what those documents



GREG PIO

Bill Motto Post veterans (clockwise from left) Bob Fessenden, Steve Bare, Ray Peterson, Robert Hall, Woody Bookout and Rick Moran.

say regarding use of the building. In addition, each side will present testimony.

"We don't feel we've been given a fair shake by the county," said veterans council president Steve Bare. "The whole situation has been handled poorly. It will be pathetic if they end up throwing us out of our own building."

At the root of the fighting is the veterans' permanent use of Room 23. A preliminary injunction issued by the county in August accuses the veterans of "commandeering" the room in September 1985, one week after they had relinquished control as promised. The veterans have maintained unauthorized control of the room ever since.

"The veterans took the room over without asking for a use permit, without putting anything in writing at all," said Ben Angove, director of the

county parks department, the agency charged with overseeing activities within the building.

"Once their fight with the national VFW was over (the local post publicly opposed the national VFW's stance in support of U.S. involvement in Central America), they were supposed to vacate the room, and for a week they were out," added Angove. "But then they decided to take the room back without telling anybody they did."

Bare does not disagree with Angove's description, but wonders what all the fuss is about. "They're basing their case on the fact that we didn't fill out the right papers."

The county, however, says there is more to it than that. As caretaker of the building, the county has long range plans, contingent on receiving a grant from the state's Historical Pres-

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ervation Fund to refurbish the entire facility and create usable space for veterans groups in the basement while renting out other space, including Room 23, to various community organizations. The county points out that Room 23 can accommodate up to 75 people and has previously been rented out for \$10 an hour.

Ray Peterson is a Vietnam vet and UVC member who volunteers some of his time to staff the VFW office in Room 23.

"We are a very active post, one of the most active in the country, and we need an office with a phone in it,"

remarked Peterson. "We love this building, it was built for us, and we think it should be our place."

The Vets Hall is located in the district of county supervisor Gary Patton.

"I think some people are under the impression that the county is trying to kick the veterans out of the building," said Patton. "That's not the case at all. Whatever the court's decision is, we want the veterans to be happy with the final outcome of the use of the building. However, I think it's good that the case is going to court because that will settle once and for all who legally has control over the building." •

—Kevin Hanson