

# Let VA be VA. Who else can save the Pacific Branch?

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For nearly a decade, a plan to restore the 388-acre Veterans Affairs campus in West Los Angeles into a veterans community has been entangled in false starts, scandal and litigation. It was not long-ago veterans set up a tent city outside the VA gates during COVID-19 to protest the agency's foot dragging. After a trial this summer, a federal judge issued a broad ruling in favor of veterans to build additional temporary and permanent housing on campus.

But that, too, could yet be another false step. The VA recently appealed the Court's order citing "irreparable harm" to the agency responsible for veterans care. And last Friday the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals temporarily blocked implementation of the District Court's order while the agency's stay motion is heard. The case has caused more uncertainty – not less – over the future of the campus and VA's suitability to resurrect a community that once reached upwards of 5,000 veteran residents.

Our organization, Vets Advocacy, has been monitoring VA's implementation of the Master Plan since its inception. And during that time, we have been asked the same question, over and over: "What's taking so long?"

The explanation varies on the immediate challenge but, with the benefit of time and perspective, I've come to one unifying answer – it's the culture.

When VA looks in the mirror, they see themselves as one of the largest integrated healthcare systems in America. It is a point of pride, and it should be, as more than 9 million veterans receive their healthcare from VA. However, gazing into the mirror, VA does not look back and see a community developer. That's the problem in West Los Angeles.

It's a unique problem, because the West LA VA sits on a property with a unique history. The land was gifted to the federal government by private donors in 1887 under explicit terms that it be used as a National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in perpetuity. The following year Congress authorized \$90,000 for 600 veterans to live "at the Pacific Branch". Eventually Pacific Branch, along with 12 other branch homes, were rolled into the Veterans Administration and, ultimately, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. With each reorganization the Pacific Branch moved further away from the home it was always intended to be.

To date there have been two federal lawsuits, two acts of Congress, two VA Office of Inspector General reports and dozens of oversight board recommendations all designed to correct VA's shortcomings. This has led me to ask a more fundamental question: Why are we demanding that VA execute this mission at all? Restoring the Pacific Branch to its historic purpose is not a core competency – and never will be – for a healthcare provider that has grappled to meet the surge in demand following 20 years of conflict in the Global War on Terrorism.

The solution has been hiding in plain sight. Just over the 405 Freeway, there are two examples of former parcels belonging to the Pacific Branch that have unique federal custodians. The concrete-clad Wilshire Federal Building is run by the General Services Administration (not VA). Across the street, the well-manicured Los Angeles National Cemetery falls under VA's National Cemetery Administration – a specialized unit dedicated to burial services. VA's healthcare professionals, who call the shots west of the 405, are divorced from land use matters to the east. And that's for the better.

What if the West LA VA Medical Center was subdivided along Wilshire Boulevard? The large VA hospital and medical offices, located south of Wilshire, are where the agency shines. Let VA be VA when it comes to providing healthcare services to veterans. But north of Wilshire, the underused section of campus needs a willing and able champion. This is where VA has fumbled over multiple administrations drawing the wrath of veterans as well as Federal Court Judge David O. Carter in his recent 125-page opinion.

Who can Americans rely on to preserve the Pacific Branch for future generations of veterans? The National Park Service has the highest favorability rating compared to other federal agencies according to a recent Pew Study. Among its 431 locations, NPS oversees maintenance and preservation of 11 National Battlefields, nine National Military Parks, four National Battlefield Parks and one National Battlefield Site. We should aim to preserve

historic sites that provide respite for those who volunteer or were drafted into military service, not just the land and oceans where the battles were fought.

In 2014, the National Park Service recognized the Pacific Branch as a historical district although the agency currently lacks administrative control of the property. The Park Service does oversee 150,000 plus acres at the nearby Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. It wouldn't be a stretch of the imagination to see Park Rangers come off the trail and begin a new era of healing at the Pacific Branch.

Most importantly, the National Park Service has already proven itself a capable steward of fostering community with The Presidio of San Francisco. The Presidio, a former military base, was transferred to the National Park Service in 1994. It is a stunning example of a public-private partnership that works with more than 1,100 homes across multiple neighborhoods and a wide variety of amenities. It is also worth adding that under the framework authorized by Congress, the Presidio reached sustainability eight years ahead of schedule.

You don't live in a hospital, nor should our veterans. So let's stop pretending that VA is best suited for the job. History has proven otherwise, and VA's maneuvering in the courts suggests the future will be no different.

This Veterans Day it's time we envision Pacific Branch National Veterans Park as Los Angeles' Presidio for veterans. Our first National Park dedicated as a living monument to a cultural heritage that began in 1887 and recognizes Los Angeles will always be home for those who have served in our nation's military.

*Anthony Allman is a native Angeleno, Army veteran and UCLA graduate. Anthony is currently Executive Director at Vets Advocacy, a non-profit organization which monitors VA's execution of the Master Plan as a result of the Valentini v McDonald case settlement in 2015. He also served on the Congressionally chartered federal advisory committee for VA West Los Angeles from 2017-2023.*

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