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OCEANSIDE: New veteran's center could open in May

By RAY HUARD - rhuard@nctimes.com | Posted: Friday, January 1, 2010 4:55 pm

North County veterans hope to open a long-awaited meeting hall and resource center in late May or early June in the city's former police station on Mission Avenue.

"The sooner the better," said Chuck Atkinson, president of the nonprofit Veterans Association of North County and the driving force behind the center. The association represents more than two dozen veterans groups.

Raising money to refurbish the old police station has been a challenge, Atkinson said. He figures it will take \$1 million.

So far, the veterans group has raised about \$275,000.

Rather than wait to raise the rest of the money, the veterans group will open the center in phases while it continues a fundraising drive, said Warren Altstatt, a board member and founder of the Veterans Association.

"Our original thought was that we would be able to acquire enough money so we could go in and do the whole refurbishment," said Altstatt, a retired Air Force chief master sergeant. "We weren't able to do that."

When it opens, the center will have a finished office, remodeled restrooms and a conference room, said Atkinson, who also is a retired Air Force chief master sergeant.

As money becomes available, a second conference room, banquet hall and kitchen will be added, he said. The Oceanside Rotary Club has agreed to raise \$150,000 to pay for the kitchen but the Veterans Association is seeking other donors to help with the rest.

"When we started, we didn't have anything," Atkinson said. "We're moving in the right direction."

Atkinson said he's been pushing for the center since 2004.

In 2008, the City Council approved a 30-year rent-free lease with the association to use most of the former police station at 1617 Mission Avenue.

Atkinson figures it will be easier to raise money when the center is up and running potential donors have something to look at.

"There's money out there," Atkinson said. "You just have to hook up with the right people."

The association's goal is to provide a meeting place for area veterans and a resource center for veterans and their families, Atkinson said.

Part of that will include a vocational training program and job center to make the transition to civilian life easier for people leaving the military, Atkinson said.

"We can help them with job placement, we have a network with human resource firms across the country so we could help train people here and help them with their resume," Atkinson said.

Call staff writer Ray Huard at 760-901-4062