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EDITORIALS

# Greener VA pastures

The 388-acre swath holds profound potential for L.A. — if the federal agency would stop renting it out.

**L**OS ANGELES IS chronically short of park space, a civic failure that generations of leaders have only glancingly addressed. In 1930, the brilliant but ignored Olmsted-Bartholomew plan envisioned a county where every resident enjoyed easy access to beaches, vistas, recreation areas and parks. Today, just 30% or so of Los Angeles' children live within walking distance of a public place to play, the lowest percentage of any major American city — and the city is growing denser all the time.

Los Angeles also is home to thousands of veterans, many homeless, troubled or injured and ill-served by the same Department of Veterans Affairs that brought the nation disgraceful conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. That agency has embarked on a confused strategy for assisting Southern California's military men and women as well.

Those compelling demands — for park space and for aid to veterans — are what make 388 acres on the Westside the subject of intense but quiet debate. Stretching across the 405 Freeway between Westwood and Brentwood, the land is federal property, donated in 1888 to be used for veterans and now home to the West Los Angeles Medical Center, a veterans hospital. It is one of the last and largest open spaces in the city, and it holds extraordinary potential — if its destiny can be wrested from the VA, which has been leasing pieces of the property for commercial development to pay for veterans programs. That development has resulted in treasured land being used for such prosaic purposes as a rental car lot. It is a program for the dissipation of this important property.

Fortunately, an assemblage of civic and political power is moving to cut the VA off at the pass. Former Mayor Richard Riordan, billionaire philanthropist Eli Broad, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Los Angeles) and County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, who has been working on this issue for years, have found common ground in support of a ban on the

property's development and the creation of a planning group charged with writing a master plan for the land. Their efforts deserve broad public and political support.

Waxman took an early lead to protect the property by introducing a bill in May that would halt its piecemeal development. Feinstein then attached similar language to a military construction appropriation bill, which has passed the House and is awaiting Senate action. That bill, with the Feinstein-Waxman rider, should be passed by the Senate and signed by President Bush.

Once that is achieved, the coalition eyeing the property begins to fracture. Broad and Riordan envision a great public park, open to all; typically, Broad emphasizes the cultural possibilities of such a site, whereas Riordan leans on its recreational prospects. Waxman and Yaroslavsky favor a plan more directly focused on the needs of veterans, along with the construction of a facility to house homeless people. Feinstein, meanwhile, has yet to commit to a specific direction.

These competing visions have significant political implications. Some veterans may oppose creating a planning group if they believe it will take land dedicated to veterans and turn it into public property; some supporters of the park may lose enthusiasm for the process if it is confined to a debate over veterans' concerns. But those disagreements are for tomorrow. For now, the goal is to stop thoughtless and incremental development of the property.

After the bill is passed and signed, the second step toward imagining the property's future should be the establishment of a federally supported master-planning process. A citizens commission — its members selected by elected leaders and representatives of the VA — should be convened and charged with drafting a comprehensive plan. That plan should begin with the needs of veterans and — then and only then — consider possible supplementary uses.

Time is running out on the property. As more of it is tied up in leases, it will prove increasingly difficult to make the most of the land. Quick action, however, will produce a rarity in Los Angeles: the chance for thoughtful, considered land use and the realistic opportunity to make the most of a treasured resource.