

# Norco naval base gate change could open door for historic-buildings preservationists

10:00 PM PST on Wednesday, February 6, 2008

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The Press-Enterprise

A planned security upgrade at the Navy base in Norco could smooth the path for the city and preservationists to gain control of historic buildings on the base, such as the pavilion by Lake Norconian.

While there is no guarantee the Navy will let go of any property, officials are working on moving the base's main entry gate from Fifth Street to Fourth Street, said Gregg Smith, a spokesman for the Seal Beach Naval Weapons Station. The station oversees the Norco base, which is formally called the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Corona Division.

"Because our Fifth Street gate is the only viable gate that we have ... the Navy requires the use of the entire property," including the area between Fifth and Fourth streets that contains historic buildings, Smith said.

Once the gate switch is made, he said, "We would have much less of a need for that part of the property."

For Norco city leaders and local preservation boosters, the move opens up possibilities. Both the city and a recently formed conservancy are interested in creating a historic district and public amenities around the old Norconian hotel, a late 1920s resort that was later turned into a naval hospital.

The hotel itself is inside the fence of the state prison adjacent to the naval base, but most other resort buildings are on Navy property.

"I think this is a great step and I think it would be very interesting if that were to happen," said Kevin Bash, who worked with his wife and daughter to create a book and documentary about the historic resort. "It would be a marvelous destination point."

City Manager Jeff Allred said the gate move could help Norco's main business corridor on Hamner Avenue because more Navy employees might be funneled through it on the way to and from work.

"That could have a positive economic benefit for the city," Allred said. "At the same time there's some traffic issues that could be created, and that's what (the Navy is) looking at."

Allred is preparing to propose the creation of a historic district that could include the resort and help supporters apply for grants to preserve it.

Before anything happens with the property, however, the Navy must first upgrade safety at the Fourth Street gate. Smith said that should happen later this year.

The gate change is a necessary first step before the Navy could declare any property surplus, but it is not a promise that will happen, he said, adding, "This is just something that we've been wanting to do for awhile for security reasons."