

Subject: Lynn Ashby Article for the Veteran's Museum

Lynn Ashby - October 6, 2004

By: LYNN ASHBY , Greater Houston Weekly Columnist 10/26/2004
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"Here in this county, we have more veterans than in any county in Texas. According to the Texas Veterans Commission, we have 205,000," says Malcolm Browne, chairman of The Veterans Museum in Texas (VMIT). So, to him, it makes only sense that this is where a national, or at least a state, veteran's museum should be built.

Browne has spent the last five years trying to round up support for the project. He has talked to at least 500 groups, developed local, state, and federal support. His board members include three retired admirals and seven retired generals, three Congressmen serving as advisory directors, two state senators, and former Texas Gov. Mark White. As a stock broker, Browne feels strongly about studying the business model developed for the D-Day Museum in New Orleans. "They waited to perform the capital campaign until the land site had been established," he says. "We will follow their lead as it only makes sense to have the location designated so that you can tell the grantors where it will be. We started the planning with a core group of diverse individuals to include, veterans, historians, lawyers, doctors, educators, etc. The initial group of volunteers numbered about 20 but has expanded to between 175 to 200 depending on which part of the project that had to be developed."

Browne has had the VMIT business model reviewed and blessed by the master plan consultants for the Houston Airport System, Leigh Fisher Associates, as they worked on the master plan for Ellington Field. He has been in discussion with Mayor Bill White and the City of Houston for a purchase of property for the museum at Ellington Field. "Typically, museum projects have been started by an individual with a collection of artifacts and then they look for a home to place them in. That is like buying the furniture without the house," according to Browne.

"After developing the business plan, one of our volunteers developed conceptual renderings and a scale model for presentation purposes," he continues. "It was necessary to take the idea to the market and see if it could stand the test of scrutiny and further development. The committee has made numerous changes over time to coincide with the suggestions made by the listeners during the presentations to various political and civic groups."

The committee has been able to establish a Web site, www.theveteransmuseumintexas.org, to get the word circulating on the Internet and has also developed three TV public service announcements in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. There are three radio spots in the various languages as well. A multitude of marketing material has been developed to tell the story of the need for the museum. The brochure gives design information, to include outside renderings, floor layouts, directors identification and contribution information. Soon a 3D walk around the museum will be added to the Web site for conceptual understanding. The museum will host five to 10 military historians to help veterans and the public research military history and preservation of oral histories.

The board's major project now is to get the city of Houston to sell, not donate, 35 acres of surplus property out of 650 total at Ellington Field. The veterans want to pay the same low price that Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison negotiated for the Army, Navy and Marine Corps reserve centers which will be moved from Old Spanish Trail to Ellington. Browne notes that the city is currently considering donating \$2 million for a private, African American museum, and feels City Hall should as forthright with the Veterans Museum as they have with other nonprofit organizations.

The anticipated cost of the project is \$100 million, and Browne has been in discussions with Jason Fuller, regional director for Sen. Hutchison for two areas: (1) A Congressional Bill establishing a federal museum designation, and (2) funding for a part of the museum. To date, Congress has been active in museum funding and has given the highly successful D-Day Museum in New Orleans about \$38 million.

"We are in discussions with a number of foundations and corporations related to sponsorship because we believe a land deal is close at hand," says Browne.

Browne, who wears a Marine Corps insignia on his lapel and a red, white and blue tie, got into this project in an indirect way.

"I graduated from Clear Creek High School and joined the Marines in 1972," he explains. "I was an infantryman, guarding an air field in Thailand for a time. After leaving the service, I went to UH and got a bachelor of science degree."

He became a senior vice president of an investment firm and eventually went out on his own as a stock broker. A friend invited Browne to attend a Veterans of Foreign War meeting and soon he joined the organization.

"I discovered that a lot of veterans' groups don't have a business plan. They have projects, but no well-thought-out business idea."

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