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## Site of new VA clinic remains a mystery

By **PAUL LEVY**, Star Tribune

March 25, 2010

While befuddled veterans and local officials wonder how a new northwest-metro VA clinic can open this year as promised, after the sudden departure of the contractor responsible for choosing a site, two developers confirmed Thursday that they have been contacted by the Department of Veterans Affairs about bids. One is from Ramsey, the other from Elk River.

Jim Deal, who proposed building a clinic near the half-vacant Ramsey Town Center along Hwy. 10, said a firm representing his company was questioned Tuesday "about the bid and some of the things we've done."

Deal said he believes the city of Ramsey, which has a separate bid of its own at the Town Center, also received a call from somebody representing the VA, but he wasn't sure whether that involved his bid or the city's. Ramsey Mayor Bob Ramsey, who said he called the VA on Monday, was unaware of any other contact with the department.

Ron Touchette, a developer hoping to build the clinic near the Wal-Mart and Home Depot stores in Elk River, received what may have been an "identical" call, "a request for clarification" a couple of weeks ago, he said.

With a Community Based Outpatient Clinic expected to be used by veterans from Anoka, Sherburne, Hennepin, Wright and Isanti counties, Touchette said "a complicated process is expected."

For months, officials in Ramsey and Elk River -- which five years ago was deemed the likely home of the clinic that is supposed to open this year -- have been left guessing.

Saying little publicly during the process, VA contractor Lee Wiech created geographic boundaries and then changed them after the original application deadline, eliminating Anoka and Coon Rapids.

Then, just weeks ago -- six months after he closed the original application process -- Wiech left his position, confirmed VA spokesman Ralph Heussner. Heussner had no explanation. Calls to Wiech and to Kim Hurt, who oversees the VA contracting office, were not immediately returned.

For the 26,500 veterans from Anoka County -- more than in all the other counties to be served by the clinic combined -- and the 6,000 veterans from Sherburne County, Wiech's departure comes as anxiety levels peak. Officials in Elk River and Sherburne County say they have not heard from the VA. Neither have officials in Anoka County and the city of

Ramsey.

"We want this for the veterans, and we'd like it here, but we'd also like to know what's going on," said Luci Botzek, Sherburne County deputy administrator.

In Anoka County, the sentiment is no different.

"What on earth are they doing?" asked Duane Krueger, director of veterans services in Anoka County for 36 years.

Both Sherburne County Commissioner Felix Schmiesing and Anoka County Board Chairman Dennis Berg, a Vietnam veteran, have criticized the lack of transparency throughout the process.

"The county that gets it isn't going to feel really good about it, and the county that doesn't get it is going to feel awful," Schmiesing said weeks ago.

Elk River was praised in a letter to top VA officials by U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann in 2008. Last year, the Anoka County Board cast its support for Ramsey and Anoka. Later, Wiech deemed Anoka too close to the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Medical Center and veterans clinic in Maplewood.

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