

NYC Board Head Wants Interfaith Center Diabetes Now Tops Vietnam Vets' Claims

DEEPTI HAJELA
Associated Press Writer

NEW YORK — The chairwoman of the community board that voted for an Islamic center and mosque near ground zero said she believes adding an interfaith dimension would help unite people, saying a non-denominational chapel built at the Pentagon as part of a Sept. 11 memorial did just that.

Julie Menin, of Manhattan Community Board 1, reiterated Monday that she supports the project going up in the proposed location two blocks north of the World Trade Center site and that it contain a mosque as developers plan. But she suggested another section of the community center be turned into an interfaith, nondenominational area for people of all religious backgrounds.

"What it could do is it could really get to the heart of the matter of making this project one that brings people together," she said.

Community Board 1 had voted overwhelmingly in May to support the Islamic center. Opponents argue it's insensitive to families and memories of Sept. 11 victims to build a mosque so close to where Islamic extremists flew planes into the World Trade Center and killed nearly 2,800 people, while

proponents support it as a reflection of religious freedom and diversity.

Menin said that she encouraged the project's organizers at the time to step back, reach out to Sept. 11 families and even hold a town hall meeting to discuss the issue but they made their own decisions on how to proceed.

Now, she said, "unfortunately what has happened is people's views have become hardened."

Menin, who first outlined her idea in an opinion piece in New York's Daily News newspaper, pointed to the interfaith chapel at the Pentagon, which was built without controversy and is used by people of many faiths.

She acknowledged that there would always be people who opposed the project but that adding the interfaith center could be an opportunity "to try to move beyond dissension and try to bring people together."

A public relations firm that represents the developers of the center, known as Park51, said plans are "still under formation" and they were "neither embracing nor rejecting the suggestion."

The developers have formed a nonprofit organization, an important step required before beginning a capital campaign. It was incorporated in Delaware on Aug. 23, and papers were submitted to the state attorney gener-

al's Charities Bureau.

The Park51 Inc. incorporation papers name Sharif El-Gamal, his brother Sammy El-Gamal and Nour Mousa as directors. Their real estate investment firm, SoHo Properties Inc., owns the proposed development site through a limited partnership.

The city confirmed Monday that the developers owe \$227,570 in back taxes on the building where the Park51 center is slated to open.

The company released a statement saying the developers are challenging the real estate assessment to reduce the property taxes.

"The city has already responded to our request with a reduction," the statement said, adding they continue to negotiate.

Also listed as a director of Park51 Inc. is Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, the spiritual leader of the project, who recently said the opposition is closely linked to the November elections.

"There is no doubt that the election season has had a major impact upon the nature of the discourse," Rauf was quoted by the Abu Dhabi-based newspaper The National in an interview as part of his Department of State-funded trip in the Persian Gulf region.

He added that he trusted the American people to follow the nation's constitutional principles.

MIKE BAKER

Associated Press Writer

RALEIGH, N.C. — By his own reckoning, a Navy electrician spent just eight hours in Vietnam, during a layover on his flight back to the U.S. in 1966. He bought some cigarettes and snapped a few photos.

The jaunt didn't make for much of a war story, and there is no record it ever happened. But the man successfully argued that he may have been exposed to Agent Orange during his stopover and that it might have caused his diabetes — even though decades of research into the defoliant have failed to find more than a possibility that it causes the disease.

Because of worries about Agent Orange, about 270,000 Vietnam veterans — more than one-quarter of the 1 million receiving disability checks — are getting compensation for diabetes, according to Department of Veterans Affairs records

obtained by The Associated Press through the Freedom of Information Act.

More Vietnam veterans are being compensated for diabetes than for any other malady, including post-traumatic stress disorder, hearing loss or general wounds.

Tens of thousands of other claims for common ailments of age — erectile dysfunction among them — are getting paid as well because of a possible link, direct or indirect, to Agent Orange.

And the taxpayers may soon be responsible for even more: The VA said Monday that it will add heart disease, Parkinson's disease and certain types of leukemia to the list of conditions that might be connected to Agent Orange. The agency estimates that the new rules, which will go into effect in two months unless Congress intervenes, will cost \$42 billion over the next 10 years.

Lawmakers and federal officials who have reservations about the spending are loath to

criticize a program that helps servicemen. They have largely ignored a 2008 report in which a group of scientists said the decision to grant benefits to so many on such little evidence was "quite extreme."

"There needs to be a discussion about the costs, about how to avoid false positives while also trying to be sure the system bends over backwards to be fair to the veterans," said Jonathan M. Samet, a public health expert who led that study and now serves as director of the Institute for Global Health at the University of Southern California.

The VA uses a complex formula when awarding benefits and does not track how much is spent for a specific ailment, but AP calculations based on the records suggest that Vietnam veterans with diabetes should receive at least \$850 million each year. That does not include the hefty costs of retroactive payments or additional costs for health care. The agency spends \$34 billion a year on disability benefits for all wars.

CASINO

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work."

The casino will offer much more than expanded gaming facilities, Redlightning said. The multi-year expansion project will also boost local employment and benefit the regional economy, he said.

"This will be a great improvement for our tribe," he said. "This will offer us long-term benefits. We will raise our standard of living, and it will provide jobs for the surrounding communities."

YST vice chairwoman Karen Archambeau agreed, noting the many benefits not only for the tribe but the region.

"The larger casino will mean more jobs, and the construction will also bring jobs to the area," she said. "This project will really help our people with our high unemployment rate of 70 to 80 percent. This helps tremendously with self-esteem for our people."

With the expansion, casino visitors will be treated to the luxury of a more comfortable and lavish gaming facility, according to tribal officials.

Phase I, which will take place east of the current casino, is slated for completion by the end of next May, Redlightning said. The development will feature a new gaming floor with a "state-of-the-art" ventilation system to eliminate smoke, he said.

"We will have an environment that is better for customers," he said.

The casino will also add more Class II machines, which are different than the current slot machines, Redlightning said. In addition, the casino will add new slot machines along with upgraded blackjack, poker and bingo areas.

The casino will expand its current six blackjack tables, possibly to a dozen, Redlightning said. One table features \$100 bets.

"Right now, we are limited to our 250 Class III machines," he said. "But we are planning to add 74 more Class II machines, which brings us to a total of 100. We can do that without negotiating for more (Class II) machines."

Tribal officials are hoping that Phase II of the development plan will occur within the next year or two. This phase would include a 100-room hotel with amenities such as a swimming pool/fitness center and a convention center with meeting rooms.

The improvements will help the casino attract more big-name entertainers and accommodate much larger crowds, Redlightning said. The casino has far outgrown its current lounge capacity of about 200 customers, he said.

"We had (country-western star) Tracy Lawrence here Saturday night, and we had a crowd of 1,100 to 1,200 people," he said. "Right now, we are holding those concerts outdoors. But we would like to have a large indoor center where we could handle those kinds of crowds."

With the expanded facilities, the casino could host conventions and large Meetings, bringing more people to the region for longer stays, Redlightning said.

Archambeau said she envisions the expanded recreational facilities benefiting more than

just casino guests.

"Visitors can come and boat during the day, then come here at night for a good meal and gaming," she said. "I have also asked for an arcade and swimming pool (at the casino) for our parents and their children so they have a place to enjoy themselves."

Phase III will feature a new lounge including a new entertainment area and a new restaurant, Redlightning said. A variety of food service amenities will enhance customer visits and provide a full-service venue, he said.

"We will tear down the rest of the current casino and old hotel (to make way for the Phase III construction)," he said. "We will build a restaurant and a new lounge and entertainment center."

Because the project is done in phases, service will not be disrupted at any time at the casino, restaurant, lounge and hotel, Redlightning said.

Monday's program featured a spiritual aspect to the celebration, including the Hilltop Singers Drum Group and a smudge offered to audience members by YST councilman Dennis Rucker.

Tribal elder Henry Selwyn offered a prayer for peace and called for unity among tribal members. He also offered thanks for the casino's jobs and income that would benefit not only the employees but also their families.

"Thank you for a new begin-

ning for the tribe and the casino, and for this way to making a living," he said.

Archambeau said she was pleased to see the casino project now under way. She credited the work of tribal attorney Rebecca Kidder of Rapid City, who worked with the tribe on the project's legal aspects.

"I am so pleased that I had this opportunity to be part of that decision," Archambeau said, referring to the expansion project.

Remarks were also offered by YST treasurer Leo O'Connor and by Karen White Horse, who spoke on behalf of YST chairman Robert "Bobby" Cournoyer, who was unable to attend the groundbreaking.

In closing, Redlightning credited the work of the casino employees. He noted about 10 percent of the employees have worked at the casino for the entire 19 years of its existence.

A large celebration is planned for the casino's 20th anniversary, with details announced in the future, Redlightning said.

Despite the national recession and a year filled with devastating blizzards and floods, the time is right for moving forward and taking the casino to the next level, Redlightning said.

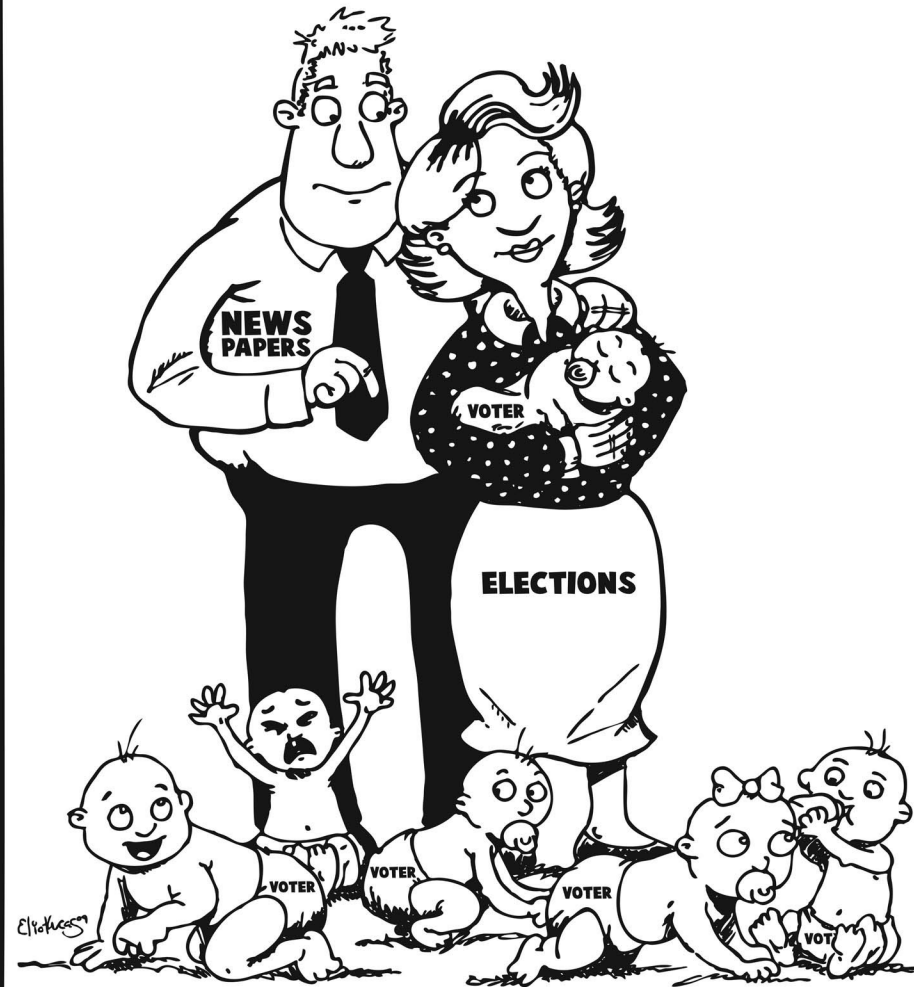
"(This expansion) means a lot of our people. It's something good," he said. "We expanded the casino so much (in the past), and now it's time to move on to something new."

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