 Former USO club may lose funding

Beauregard Parish landmark could be forced to close

By SHAWN MARTIN
American Press

DeRIDDER (AP) — For nearly 18,000 soldiers of the 48th Infantry Division, “The Thunderbirds” stationed at Camp Polk, and the nearby DeRidder Army Air Base, it offered a respite from the preparations for war. Thousands of servicemen found rest and relaxation at the nation’s first United Service Organizations Club in DeRidder.

The doors of the white, wood-framed building were opened 10 months after the USO was formed in February 1941. At 128-by-165-feet, the DeRidder building is the largest of the five types of buildings designed by the Quartermaster Corps and designated for USO clubs. The LeBlanc Brothers of Baton Rouge built it for $37,480. One hundred carpenters worked around the clock for 39 days to finish what officially opened on Thanksgiving night 1941 as the soldiers’ “home away from home.”

To give it that homey atmosphere, furniture was borrowed from local homes. Six decades later, the building still stands and in many ways serves the same purpose. It is a gathering spot for entertainment and community business, only it’s known as the Beauregard Parish War Memorial Civic Center.

The building remains a place of honor and pays tribute to the memories of the hundreds of thousands of veterans who served their country during World War II.

In 1946 it became DeRidder’s civic center. A small tax has supported the building’s maintenance and upkeep. The 1.12-mill tax generates about $133,000 annually.

Taxpayers, however, turned down the tax renewal last month, leaving the building’s future uncertain. Without the money, it would be difficult or nearly impossible for the already cash-strapped Beauregard Parish Jury to take on another public building.

“We have enough to run the civic center until the end of the year,” said civic center director Jo-Elta Runge. “After that, without the tax money, I don’t know what will happen.”

The building was placed on the National Register of Historical places in February 1992. Besides the residents who use the facility as a gathering spot for civic meetings, entertainment and other purposes, thousands of tourists visit it each year because of its national historical significance.

In July, more than 1,700 people were served by the civic center, Runge said.

“We need the tax to keep the doors of this wonderful building open,” Runge said. “It would be a shame if we had to close such a great place.”

Runge said the Police Jury is planning to call a Jan. 19 special election for the renewal of the millage. In May 1946, voters approved a 1-mill tax and have repeatedly renewed it during the past 55 years. The July renewal was defeated by only 49 votes.

“I believe the voters will do what’s right for this historical building,” Runge said. “We want to keep this landmark open and available to everyone.”

THE ADVOCATE
BATON ROUGE, LA

[Image of Associated Press photos]