

WEST COUNTY TIMES

El Cerrito: County plans to build ramp at historic veterans hall

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EL CERRITO -- Joe Pickell, who manages the city's Veterans Memorial Building, says he's excited about Contra Costa County's plans to install a wheelchair ramp at the 82-year-old structure on Stockton Avenue.

Soon, handicapped members of American Legion Louis Hagen Post 340, whose headquarters are at the hall, will be able to enter the building unassisted.

Pickell says it will also be easier to rent the hall out for parties and other gatherings when people find out that handicapped guests can access it more easily.

"They said they are supposed to be putting the ramp in in September or October," Pickell said. "It's a miracle that comes true, and it's going to help the veterans in wheelchairs and walkers to come to meetings and events."

Pickell said the El Cerrito Historical Society and Supervisor John Gioia were the key ingredients in making the whole thing happen after hearing about how disabled veterans couldn't negotiate the steep steps at the front entrance of the building.

"I don't know if people know how many veterans are not able to climb up the steps," said Pickell, the Legion 340 post commander and a Viet Nam vet. "We've been trying to get one for 10 years."

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The county isn't sure yet how much the ramp will cost but it was identified in the current budget as a priority for the Facilities Lifestyle Improvement Program that upgrades county-owned facilities, said Karen Laws, a principal real property agent for the county.

"The county has identified (Americans for Disabilities Act) improvements for buildings around the county, and this one ranks high," Gioia said. "I've been at the building for a number of events, and I've observed that it would get wider use if it was more accessible."

Laws said all the veterans buildings in Contra Costa are owned by the county, which built them in the years following World War I, known at the time as "The Great War."

Pickell said rental fees are essential for Post 340 to maintain the hall since Contra Costa doesn't pay for such costs as electricity, water and furniture replacement.

The hall is rented regularly for bar mitzvahs, baptisms and meetings for immigrant groups, but the absence of a ramp has been a deal breaker for some, Pickell said.

"We've had people decide not to rent the hall (because of the lack of handicapped access)," he said.

The building is a key part of El Cerrito history, Pickell added.

"Many years ago, it was a center of the community with parades and all kinds of things going on," he said.

The county Board of Supervisors allocated \$22,500 to purchase the site and build the steel-reinforced concrete structure.

El Cerrito celebrated the opening on Sept. 24, 1932 with a parade down San Pablo Avenue from Cutting Boulevard to the Alameda

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County line, according to El Cerrito Historical Society records.

Louis Hagen, for whom Post 340 is named, was an El Cerrito resident who died while serving in France during World War I, according to the records.

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