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## Deal Near On Armory Property

By JOSE PATINO GIRONA, *The Tampa Tribune*

WEST TAMPA - The two parties negotiating the sale of the Fort Homer Hesterly Armory expect to sign a deal in about three weeks, a first step in redeveloping the property.

The Heritage Square at the Armory group would then have 60 days to complete a land survey, title work, and archaeological and environmental studies of the 10-acre property, 522 N. Howard Ave., said Mark Bentley, an attorney for the Florida National Guard.

After the work is completed, Heritage Square would have 50 days to submit three relocation sites for the Guard's vehicle maintenance unit. Each site must be within 15 miles of the armory unless the Guard agrees otherwise, Bentley said.

Heritage Square's \$93 million project would include a hotel, day spa, farmers market, cafes, restaurants, boutiques, a park and cultural center.

The 80,000-square-foot armory building must remain intact.

The developer also must reimburse the Guard for \$830,000 in building improvements and pay an estimated \$250,000 in relocation costs, Bentley said. The cost of a new location and facility hasn't been determined.

'We are moving forward with it,' said Chris Duffy-Waldman, spokeswoman for Heritage Square. 'We are very excited.'

The historical armory was built in 1941 and was a popular venue for concerts, dances, wrestling and speeches, including appearances by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and President Kennedy. The Guard moved most of its operations to Pinellas Park in 2005.

About a month ago, the Guard submitted proposed land-use changes to the Hillsborough Planning Commission to allow for private redevelopment. The Guard must also request a rezoning from the city, but that probably won't be considered until November, Bentley said.

Jon Myatt, spokesman for the Florida Department of Military Affairs in St. Augustine, said the process

might seem slow to the private sector, but the sale of government property takes longer because of state criteria.

Two other groups were named as finalists for the property's redevelopment.

The Armory Partners Group of Tampa proposes a video, film and sound studio, and creative arts businesses. The estimated \$64 million project also would include retail, a grocery store, restaurants and apartments.

Reliant Development of Tampa's \$65 million proposal includes an ice rink and multipurpose facility in the armory building. The rink could be converted for concerts, basketball and indoor soccer. Stores, restaurants and condominiums also would be built.

If the Heritage Square plan falls through, Armory Partners will have the next chance to meet the Guard's requirements.

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