

Historic hospital in limbo, mired in U.S. red tape

State still holds title to site

by **David Showers** | 8-13-20 at 3:22 a.m.

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HOT SPRINGS -- The transfer of the Army and Navy General Hospital to the federal government could take longer than expected, said the nonprofit that has taken the lead in securing a caretaker for the forlorn property at 105 Reserve St.

Preserve Arkansas Executive Director Rachel Patton said Wednesday that the disposition of the Mission/Spanish-style building that has overlooked downtown since 1933 is enmeshed in the slow-moving gears of federal bureaucracy. She explained that the U.S. Department of the Army is waiting to hear from the U.S. Department of the Interior before it decides what to do with the property.

In the interim, the title to the 20-acre campus remains with the state, she said. Arkansas Rehabilitation Services, the state agency that vacated the building at the end of June, announced its departure in May 2019. Arkansas Rehabilitation Services said in June that it would vacate the building, effective July 1.

Last fall the state discontinued the residential job training program for young adults with disabilities at the campus, known as the Arkansas Career Training Institute and later the Arkansas Career Development Center.

The deed conveyed the property from the Army to the state in 1960, and the enabling 1959 act of Congress stipulated that the property would immediately revert to the Army if the Secretary of the Army determined that it was no longer being used for health or education.

Patton said the secretary has yet to make that determination.

"The Secretary of the Army will not determine it belongs to the United States government until he hears from the Secretary of the Interior," she said. "Once that answer is received by the Army, then they will proceed accordingly, either transferring it to the Department of the Interior or they will take it, and at that point, the Army will have those caretaker responsibilities."

"They've already said they don't want it. They would immediately report it to the General Services Administration, and GSA would essentially act as the real estate broker for the Department of the Army. And they would be trying to dispose of this as surplus property or sell it," she said.

Patton said Preserve Arkansas, which put the building on its 2020 list of the state's Most Endangered Places, and a committee of The Greater Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce were drafting a letter to the state's congressional delegation asking for help with the Army before they learned of the Interior Department's role in the conveyance process.

That role is spelled out in the 1959 congressional act, which gives the Interior Department the right to take custody of the building if it reverts to the federal government. Patton said the Army offered the property to the Interior Department in a June 15 letter, but it has yet to get a response.

"Even though the Army has already sent that letter to Interior, they're just fulfilling the rest of their responsibilities in that property conveyance statute," she said. "That was kind of a surprise to us. I expected it would take a little bit of time for the property transfer to go through, but we did not fully understand it was going to remain with the state until the Secretary of Interior makes a decision. Who knows how long that will take."

"There were several people who were surprised just this phase of it could be drawn out for a lot longer than what everybody thought. If the Secretary of the Interior doesn't respond for two years, then that's his prerogative."

Patton said Preserve Arkansas and the chamber committee are drafting a letter urging the congressional delegation to nudge Interior Secretary David L. Bernhardt into action.

Arkansas Rehabilitation Services said in June that it could take up to six months until the reversion process is completed. Until then, water and electrical service will continue to be maintained for fire suppression purposes, it said.

The Hot Springs Fire Department has said electricity is needed to operate pumps that pressurize the building's water supply system. Other officials have said the building's antiquated wiring would make it difficult to restore electricity if service were interrupted for an extended period.

Patton said the Great American Outdoors Act that became law earlier this month could be a boon for the building. The \$900 million a year it provides for the Land and Water Conservation Fund could be used to rehabilitate the building, she said.

"That legislation was outstanding news, and something we've worked for years to get money to address the deferred maintenance backlog in national parks," she said. "[The Land and Water Conservation Fund] could be used to acquire properties and also do maintenance and repairs. That pot of money might be very helpful in this situation. It might allow us to rehab the Army and Navy Hospital and keep it a part of Hot Springs National Park."

[Department of the Interior](#), [Rachel Patton](#), [United States](#), [Greater Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce](#), [Arkansas](#), [Water Conservation Fund](#), [Great American Outdoors Act](#)