

Recovery Act is key to archives project in Valmeyer

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VALMEYER • The government is quietly tucking away records into the limestone caves along the Mississippi River.

A Columbia, Ill., developer has retrofitted a former limestone quarry here into a government-leased storage facility that looks part Indiana Jones and part X-Files. But the loot is nothing as adventurous as buried gold or long lost treasure maps. Rather, it's military veteran records.

The wine cellar-like environment enables the facility to keep humidity levels low and a constant temperature of about 58 degrees. That, officials say, makes the place perfect to house federal records from the National Archives.

The quarry walls remain exposed, offering a unique mix of tall filing cabinets and limestone globes. Government rations from the Cold War era are still visible in some of the cave's corners. At times, movable carts make it look as if government workers are mining the rock for paper records. The facility houses records for civilian federal personnel who retired after 1973.

The complex recently expanded with a new 75,000-square-foot storage facility with help from the federal stimulus program.

Government officials have leased the facility and plan to store military veteran records there soon.

The project added 50 construction jobs and will eventually bring 10 permanent staff jobs. Officials hope the facility will give the Valmeyer area an economic shot in the arm.

The St. Louis region is already a hot spot for government record storage. The National Personnel Records Center, one of the largest operations of the National Archives, has its main building in St. Louis County.

Financing for the cave deal came from a 2009 American Recovery Act program, which allows local governments to pass along tax-exempt, low-interest financing to private borrowers to expand their enterprises and create jobs.

Monroe and Randolph counties have pooled their resources to make the project happen. Neither county had enough bonding authority to help build the records storage facility on its own. A new Illinois law this year allowed the two counties to pool their share of federal money.

The partnership was facilitated by the Illinois Finance Authority, which offers hands-on support to help businesses get capital for growth.

Chris Meister, the executive director for the authority, said the project involves a \$4.5 million loan with an initial interest rate of 6 percent. He hopes other counties also take advantage of the money before the program expires at the end of the year.

"It's a use-it-or-lose-it resource," Meister said.

The project is headed by Columbia, Ill., businessman Joe Koppeis, who has developed shopping centers in Chester, Columbia and Freeburg. The facility is a separate structure from his Rock City Business Complex, which is also in the limestone cave.