

Middletown leaders reject plan to sell 90 acres of open space for CT Veterans Cemetery expansion

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Connecticut Army National Guard Honor Guard member Spc. Edwin Maldonado, left, carries the flag as Sgt. Anthony Lopez carries the urn of U.S. Army veteran James Dickinson during a ceremony for unclaimed veterans' remains at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown in October.

Dave Zajac/Hearst Connecticut Media file photo



Samantha Gagnon/Contributed photo



Hearst Connecticut Media file photo

MIDDLETOWN — After nearly two hours of public testimony Tuesday night, city leaders voted unanimously not to sell some 90 acres of open space to the state for

a much-needed expansion of the [State Veterans Cemetery](#) in Middletown.

The property, on Bow Lane and parts of Cedar Lane and Reservoir Road, is among five parcels totaling 256 acres of land near [Connecticut Valley Hospital](#).

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In 2005, after 15 years of negotiations, the state turned over the parcels following pressure from legislators and a group called Residents Against Institutional Dumping, which Middletown attorney Ralph Wilson represented.

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He presented a historical narrative of the property at the Nov. 4 council meeting, listing a number of reasons to oppose the plan. Perhaps most notably, Wilson said, residents weren't notified by the city or state about the latest possible transfer of the land.

Citizens packed Council Chambers Tuesday night, making their appeal for and against the proposal.

Before the council voted 11-0 against the plan, many veterans spoke passionately about the importance of annexing the cemetery property.

This year, there have been 273 in-ground cremations, according to state Department of Veterans Affairs Deputy Commissioner Joe Danao. Only 738 spaces remain. They are projected to be filled in about three years and three months, he added.

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The Middletown cemetery, which comprises some 21 acres, opened on Nov. 11, 1984, he said.

Planning & Zoning Commissioner and former mayor [Seb Giuliano](#), who was involved in the negotiations years ago, said he approved the measure when it came before the board, however, "if certain facts had been presented, that approval would not have happened."

Kimberly Inglis said she's "extremely devastated, disappointed and saddened with an overall feeling of distress again trying to save our neighborhood."

She echoed the sentiments of many others, saying "a change of this magnitude should have been brought to" those who live in the neighborhood.

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Krishna Winston, who speaks frequently at meetings on environmental issues, said she learned about the proposal Saturday afternoon from a neighbor. She worries about chemicals, including those involved in the embalming process, leaching into the land as well as pesticides and herbicides used to maintain the grounds.

Bob Westendorff opposes the idea of establishing other veterans cemeteries to fill demand.

"This isn't about paying respect to the men who died serving our country. We do not want part of it here, some up there, some down on the other side of the street. It needs to be in one place," he said.

Meghan Carta, a former common councilwoman, said she strongly opposes the sale. Her and her family's land, which she called "our little compound for generations," abuts the land in question. "All of us want to see it remain where it is."

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Mark Schappert purchased his 4.5-acre, "highly neglected" farm on Reservoir Road some three years ago. He plans on eventually raising horses there.

"I am outraged this kind of thing can happen. Negotiations have likely gone on for years, nothing in the public record," he said.

Common Council Clerk Linda Reed said nine letters, all opposing the sale, had been received.

Ahead of the meeting, Common Council President Gene Nocera spoke about how important the preservation of natural resources is to Middletown.

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“The Maromas area of this community is something we have to protect,” Nocera said. “It’s easy to take your eye off the target in these kinds of things.”

Wilson, whose land shares a half-mile common border with the site, said his family declined the state’s inquiry to sell their land for an expansion “as it does not belong in a neighborhood,” he wrote.

At the time, a deed restriction was placed on the property, Wilson said.

The five Maromas properties “provide a unique opportunity for Middletown to enhance a large area of open space for recreational opportunities for Middletown’s residents,” [the city website said](#), calling the land a “valuable resource.”

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In fact, the Middletown Conservation and Agriculture Committee has called [these 2,000 acres the “last great place.”](#)

Middletown has [well over 1,000 acres of open space](#), and continues to add to that inventory.

Another reason to reject the idea, Wilson said, were potential environmental impacts, as the site is cut through by a stream that flows to the watershed protection area and aquifer. Caskets, he wrote, decompose into the soil, “leaching contaminants” from the decaying process.

Research Wilson conducted discovered that a home near a cemetery is typically valued some 12.3 percent less than a home in the same neighborhood.

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Vietnam veteran Michael Rogalsky of Middletown encouraged his fellow veterans to speak at the meeting via email. He called the need an “urgent” one.

It would allow the state to “continue to provide a final resting place for our veterans to honor and show respect that they have earned, and to show that Middletown will never forget what they have done for our country and our freedoms that we enjoy today,” Rogalsky wrote.

Prior to the meeting, Council President Gene Nocera said he understands arguments made by both residents — and veterans.

“It’s a terrible position to be in because the council has always supported our veterans. We understand how important that is. Our veterans deserve every support the city can provide,” he said.

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[A change.org petition created Sunday by Victoria Thompson](#), urging the council to deny the resolution, had garnered more than 160 signatures. It also outlines the long process by which the land was obtained.

The issue should be discussed in public, Thompson wrote. “The state’s request for secrecy does not outweigh constituents’ rights to be informed, especially when the decision could have such a devastating effect on the value of properties and private water.”

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