

Space Running Out At State Veterans Cemetery; Demand For Plots Subject Of Survey

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FULL TEXT

The state Department of Veterans Affairs is trying to gauge long-term demand for plots in the State Veterans Cemetery as the burial rate increases and the cemetery fills.

The department is asking veterans to answer questions about their final resting plans on an online survey, to see if the department needs to include acquiring additional cemetery land in its master plan.

The 24-acre Middletown cemetery has a capacity for 19,600 grave sites and there have been 12,438 burials, Ryan McKenna, manager of the department's office of advocacy and assistance, said Wednesday. At the current rate of about 700 burials a year, the cemetery will be full in less than 15 years, McKenna said.

"The master plan is to establish a cemetery that can sustain veteran burials for Connecticut veterans for 40-50 years," he said. "The plan will take into consideration acquiring additional land near the current cemetery or establishing another one somewhere within the state —whichever makes the most sense based on the data from the survey combined with any resource constraints."

"Having a comprehensive cemetery master plan ensures the DVA will continue its commitment of 'serving those who served' with honor and dignity in a place befitting their sacrifices to our state and nation," state Veterans Affairs Commissioner Thomas Saadi said. "This plan, and the vital input from veterans and the community, will allow those who served the opportunity to choose the State Veterans Cemetery for their final resting place for many years to come."

Located between Connecticut Valley Hospital and Calvary Cemetery, the Middletown cemetery opened in 1985 after the veterans cemetery in Darien closed. The Middletown site is being expanded by another 2,000 burial plots on eight acres, but McKenna called that a short-term fix.

A decade ago, the burial rate in state veterans cemeteries was about 300 a year. That increased to 600 last year and has continued to rise. Much of the increase is driven by deaths of World War II veterans.

Figures on the National World War II Museum website show 558,000 veterans of the war living in 2017, including 8,879 in Connecticut. Those veterans are dying at a rate of 362 a day. By 2025, less than 100,000 will remain, according to the museum. George Eisenbach, director of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' cemetery grants program, said the trend in Connecticut is reflected nationwide.

The \$5.45 million cemetery expansion, to be finished by the end of the year, is federally funded. The federal government has also provided \$3.17 million to raise, clean and realign all headstones in accordance with federal standards.

Notable graves in the Middletown cemetery include those of former Gov. William A. O'Neill and Medal of Honor recipient William J. Johnston of Colchester, a U.S. Army veteran of World War II.

The only other state-operated veterans cemetery with available plots is the Col. Raymond F. Gates Memorial Cemetery in Rocky Hill, which historically has been reserved for residents of the Veterans Home and the Sgt. John L. Levitow Healthcare Center. The commissioner may grant exceptions, but that site has a capacity for 1,800 graves and 1,635 are filled, McKenna said.

Credit: Jesse Leavenworth

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