

CT looks for new veteran cemetery option after Middletown rejects expansion amid spots filling up

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The funeral service for U.S. Army Air Force Tech. Sgt. Kenneth J. McKeeman was held at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown June 7. McKeeman, of Waterbury, was killed with the entire crew of a B-24 Liberator during a WWII bombing mission over France in 1944.

Ned Gerard/Hearst Connecticut Media



Frank LoGiudice/For Hearst Connecticut Media

MIDDLETOWN — The [Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs](#) had to decline a \$4 million federal grant after [Middletown officials rejected a request earlier this month to expand the State Veterans Cemetery on Bow Lane](#).

The agency went through a very competitive national process to apply for a limited amount of money through the [National Cemetery Administration's](#) Veterans Cemetery Grants Program, according to Deputy VA Commissioner Joseph Danao.

The money was awarded based on the Middletown expansion being included in the agency's master plan, which runs from 2018 to 2068, Danao said. The agency didn't expect the city to reject the idea, which comes as the cemetery is running out of space.

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The money was turned down for a practical reason, he added.

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“We don’t have a viable property option right now,” he said. “We’re still working the property pieces, so there’s nothing conclusive.”

Grant conditions require construction projects start by Sept. 30.

“No matter what we do at this point, we’re not going to meet that,” Danao said. “We’re still trying to see what our next steps are.”

Common Council members voted unanimously Nov. 12 not to sell about 90 acres of open space to the state for a much-needed annex. 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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The cemetery, which comprises some 21 acres, opened on Veterans Day, Nov. 11, 1984.

The council’s resounding 11-0 vote “is calling our attention to other areas that aren’t defined now,” Danao said.

“Everything’s back on the table right now,” he said. “It’s going to take everybody to support what will be the next steps.”

The DVA expects to apply again next year before the July 1 deadline. Applications are rated nationally in September, Danao said, and in October, the ranking is made public.

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Grants pay for 100% of each project.

During the meeting, citizens spoke for nearly two hours, many opposing the idea of having the cemetery closer to their properties. Some talked about the potential of environmental hazards due to chemicals involved in the embalming process, as well as pesticides and herbicides used to maintain the grounds.

Local veterans also gave passionate accounts of the importance of making sure military members are laid to rest with full military honors in Middletown.

[The U.S. DVA](#) requires states to maintain a master plan that projects at least five years out, Danao said. The current one, vetted by residents across Connecticut, including Middletown, forecasts conditions over a 50-year span.

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“Veterans, whether they’re 20, 40, 60, deserve that respectful option of having a final resting place among their fellow veterans,” Danao said. “It is an option that veterans prior to them had, and it’s something we want to protect going forward.”

Currently, there is room for 2,032 more casket burials, although plots are projected to be full within 10 years.

“I am doubtful that will last that long because our veteran population, particularly 60 and older being 60 percent of the total, is something we have to be aware of and plan for,” Danao said.

Space for casket burials and above-ground cremains is concerning, but the remaining 711 in-ground cremains plots are an “urgent concern,” he said. With a number of military conflicts ending, Danao said the cemetery is seeing an increase in use.

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Upright, marble headstones are used in Middletown as well as at the Col. Raymond F. Gates Memorial Cemetery in Rocky Hill.

“It’s a very stunning view as you approach the cemetery,” he said. “It takes a lot of maintenance ... but it’s such a place of honor for military veterans, and even more so using ... upright stones instead of flat stones.”

Middletown is ideally suited for a state cemetery, Danao said. It’s in the center of Connecticut and close to various means of transportation.

“But we have to have a willing seller of buildable, suitable property,” he said.

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To obtain funding for grounds upkeep, Danao said, “you have to adhere to a very stringent criteria of policies, procedures and maintenance.”

That includes having a “committal shelter” for military services, which shields funeral proceedings from the elements. It could also potentially be enclosed and include heating and cooling systems, something Middletown does not have.

Presently, tents are used. Strong winds often blow across the grounds, sometimes causing flags to fall over. It can be an unpleasant experience in hot, cold, rainy or snowy conditions, Danao acknowledged.

Federal criteria indicates 50 buildable acres are needed, but more land is necessary for stormwater retention, filtration, environmental buffering, a row of flags for every state, memorial area and more, Danao said.

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He’d also like to see a cinder walking path around the cemetery grounds so veterans can reflect on their own military service as well as those close to them.

Danao, his wife, son and son-in-law all served in the military.

“It is important that we protect this opportunity to have our veterans have a most respectful and honored final resting place,” he said.

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