

Opinion: Let's make sure our veterans can rest in peace

By Chelsea Donaldson | Opinion Contributor | Feb. 17th, 2025

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Through my work at the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center, I have represented veterans through many stages of their life – including death. Veterans have many benefits past death, including the right to a burial in a state cemetery reserved exclusively for veterans. In Connecticut, there is only one – the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown, Connecticut.



The cemetery is the final resting place for over 16,000 veterans. It stands as the largest memorial to veterans in the state. It is the final resting place for soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines who served in our nation's wars and those who served in peacetime. It is operated by the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs (CT

DVA), which governs the solemn duty of ensuring that our veterans rest comfortably and peacefully in their passing and that their loved ones and others who wish to honor their memory can visit.

However, the cemetery is running out of room. CT DVA estimates that in less than three years, there will be no more plots available. As it stands, there are less than 800 plots left for Connecticut veterans.



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Should the cemetery run out of room, Connecticut families will need to travel out of state in order to bury their loved ones in a veteran-specific cemetery. There are

no other options for families in Connecticut save for Middletown. The cemetery itself abuts open property that the state wishes to purchase, but in November of 2024, Middletown residents soundly rejected calls to expand the cemetery – including calls from Middletown veterans who wish to be buried at the cemetery when they pass.

Concerns run the gamut. People are concerned about chemicals leaching into the soil, without any real data to support the claim that the current State Veterans Cemetery has been damaging to the environment. Others voiced discontent about a potential reduction in property values adjacent to the proposed expansion. Still others state that Middletown (a town that has well over 1,000 acres of open space and counting) should not part with this 90 acres, as it would contradict the town's mission to remain "the last great place."

For what it's worth, the state has said it is determined to find a space to house veterans after they pass, but the efforts seem uncoordinated and even wasteful. Governor Lamont's recently released budget allotted less than half of the \$15 million required to build a new cemetery for veterans in Connecticut. The Department of Administrative Services is also reaching out for suggestions as to a location to build a new cemetery, which would be inherently more costly than expanding the cemetery that is already built.

My perspective is a fairly straightforward one. On one hand, I admire the desire to preserve our natural space. I live in a wooded area, and I love that Connecticut fiercely defends its state parks, nature reserves, and our wildlife. But on the other hand, I have been on the receiving end of that phone call in which a spouse has informed me that their beloved veteran has died, and they have no idea what to do next. I could not fathom telling these spouses that they must travel to New York or Massachusetts to visit their loved ones in order to obtain the burial benefits their spouses have rightfully earned.

This situation is not akin to building a factory or a trash dump next to your house. It is expanding an existing state cemetery to allow veterans the right to be buried in their state, as it is required by law. It's my hope that Middletown and the State of Connecticut reach an agreement to allow this expansion, so our veterans can enjoy their final days knowing that their spouse will not need to fight for them to be buried alongside their sisters and brothers at arms. Instead, they can visit with their loved ones in the quiet serenity that is the State Veterans Cemetery in

Middletown, Connecticut. If we say we honor our veterans in life, we should also honor them in death.



Chelsea Donaldson is a member of the Connecticut Mirror's Community Editorial Board.

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