

'Impending crisis'

Save Our Cemetery seeks aid to annex veterans burial grounds

By **Cassandra Day**
STAFF WRITER

MIDDLETOWN — A grassroots campaign of war veterans hopes Connecticut lawmakers will address an “impending crisis” by adopting a resolution to expand the State Veterans Cemetery after Middletown denied a state Veterans Affairs request to buy 90 acres of adjacent city land three months ago.

Organizers are urging the governor and legislators to make the issue more of a priority, according to Charles Pickett, of New Haven, senior vice commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Department Connecticut.

He, along with two other veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars CT vice chairpersons Mike Monaco of Glastonbury and Oakdale resident Charise Hewitt, launched the Save Our Cemetery campaign to advocate for an annex to the Bow Lane cemetery instead of a whole new one.

The state cemetery hosts an estimated 273 in-ground cremated burials a year, according to the state's request for proposals package. As of Nov. 21, 2024, it said, 711 in-ground cremation burial plots remain. The projected exhaustion of this burial option is late summer 2027.

Many citizens spoke out at the Nov. 12 Common Council hearing on the matter, mostly rejecting the proposal, citing potential environmental



An honor guard carries a casket during funeral service at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown. The Save Our Cemetery campaign is seeking legislative support to address a much-needed expansion.

Ned Gerard/Hearst Connecticut Media

hazards from chemicals used in the embalming process, along with pesticides and herbicides applied on the grounds.

Area veterans strongly supported the measure.

As a result, the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs had to decline a \$4 million National Cemetery Administration Veterans Cemetery Grants Program, Deputy VA Commissioner Joseph Danao has said.

The agency went through a competitive process to apply for a limited amount of money through the National

Cemetery Administration.

Pickett, who attended the council meeting, said he was “dispirited” by the testimony considering the “impending crisis.”

A municipal veterans representative for the city of New Haven, Pickett is the grandson of former state representative and state senator Charles J. Arrigoni. His father is a Navy veteran and former state senator John F. Pickett Jr.

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars veteran was raised on Ridge Road in Middletown, graduated

from Xavier High School in 1985, and now teaches freshman English at the Sound School in New Haven.

“Every year, I go back to my hometown and the headstones are getting closer and closer together,” Pickett explained.

VFW CT Commander Stanley Borusiewicz created a temporary Veteran Cemetery Committee at the November Council of Administration meeting, and named Pickett chairman.

State Veterans Affairs Commissioner Ron Welch testified Feb. 13

during the Veterans and Military Affairs public hearing on HB05117, an Act Concerning the Department of Veterans Affairs and a Connecticut Veterans Cemetery.

The average annual burial rate at the cemetery over the last five years is 763, Welch said in support of the legislation. As of Feb. 1, there were 1,990 available casket plots, 677 available buried cremains plots, and 1,767 available columbarium niches at the cemetery.

The average annual rate of usage for the three

types of plots are 169 caskets, 273 buried cremains and 160 columbarium niches, he said. “At this rate of usage, we project the depletion of available casket plots in December 2036; buried cremains in August 2027; and columbarium niches in June 2035.”

The Department of Administrative Services posted a request for proposals to acquire buildable land for use as a new state cemetery. Proposals are due by Feb. 28.

“With the Middletown State Veterans Cemetery reaching capacity, there was a real possibility eligible Connecticut veterans would have to be interred out-of-state on Long Island or Massachusetts in a VA national cemetery,” Pickett said. “Veterans I talked to saw this as shameful if not very disrespectful.

“Many of them questioned if their home state of Connecticut really valued their service and sacrifice to our nation. For some veterans we talked to and emailed, it was a real existential crisis,” he added.

Pickett is asking supporters to encourage people to visit CTVets.us and join the SOC email list, encourage veteran groups to endorse the resolution, and ask their state legislators to support the effort.

For more information, visit soc.vfwnewhaven.org. For details on the bid, go to portal.ct.gov and enter “DVA — RFP 25-01” in the search bar.

CT's award-winning Giant Schnauzer Monty retires

By **Lilli Iannella**
STAFF WRITER

When the judges of the 149th Westminster Kennel Club dog show announced that Monty, a 5-year-old Giant Schnauzer who lives in Chaplin, Conn., won best in show, handler and co-owner Katie Bernardin immediately burst into tears.

“I just couldn’t believe he did it,” Bernardin said. “I was just proud of him. It was a lot, just a lot of emotions at that moment.”

In that moment, Monty stared into Bernardin’s eyes, embraced her, then leapt for joy after Bernardin’s husband, Adam, jumped out of the stands at Madison Square Garden to get down and celebrate with the winning duo.

“To me that dog has so much heart and so much try,” Bernardin said. “I just know that Monty would walk through fire for me. He would try his

hardest, and he did. His charisma, his attitude, he just loves that environment and the energy of the people clapping.”

Following a four-year career of competing in various dog shows, from the National Dog Show on Thanksgiving Day to the American Kennel Club National Championship dog show, Monty officially retired after his best in show win at Westminster last Tuesday, Bernardin said.

“He is totally done. He has won the pinnacle of our sport. There is nothing more he can do, except be an excellent pet,” Bernardin said.

Westminster marked Monty’s 65th best in show win, Bernardin said. Yet competing at the Westminster Kennel Club dog show wasn’t new for either Monty or Bernardin. Monty has won best in the working group at Westminster for three straight years, but this was the first time he

won it all.

“I couldn’t have asked for a better partner,” Bernardin said.

Additionally, Monty was the first Giant Schnauzer to take home best in show in the competition’s nearly 150-year history, and the last time a dog in the working group won the top prize was in 2004, announcers said during the show.

Monty competed against over 2,500 dogs across the seven major dogs groups in this year’s Westminster show, according to a news release. To prepare for his last show, Monty spent less time competing during the past month and more time training and grooming, Bernardin said. He got plenty of haircuts, hair conditioning treatments and baths, for instance.

“We wanted to make sure walking in there that he looked the best that we could make him look,” Bernardin said.

“When we walked in the building, we said no matter what happens, we know he looks better than ever, and we’re happy to take our dog home.”

Monty’s training routine includes physical therapy and cold laser therapy, a water treadmill to build muscle and ball work, typically with a device called “FitPaws” to work his core and legs, and a water treadmill to build muscle, Bernardin told CT Insider in December.

Getting ready for shows takes about an hour and 15 minutes, Bernardin said, which includes getting his legs and face washed, his fur blow dried and his eyebrows hairsprayed. Before going into the arena, Bernardin always leaves Monty with words of encouragement.

“I always tell him to do his job,” Bernardin said.

Now that Monty is retired, Bernardin said she looks forward to not hav-

ing to worry about keeping him in pristine condition for dog shows.

“It will be nice to stay home, stay local,” Bernardin said. “He can just go be a dog. He can go get dirty, roll in the mud, he can go do whatever Monty wants to do and not just live in a bubble.”

Some of Monty’s favorite activities are laying on the couch and playing with soccer balls. As a reward for his win last week, Bernardin said she has a special gift for Monty in mind.

“As soon as this snow and this ice leaves, that boy gets a brand new soccer ball,” Bernardin said. “And I don’t even care if it’s in mud, go at it boy.”

Bernardin, now 39 years old, showed her first dog at the age of 7 and became a dog handler at 24. Prior to showing Monty, Bernardin showed Ty, Monty’s father. Monty followed in his father’s footsteps,

Bernardin explained; in 2017, Ty was named the No. 1 all-breed dog in the country, and in 2024, Monty was awarded the same honor, according to a news release. In 2018, Ty won reserve best in show at Westminster, which according to the American Kennel Club is given to the runner-up to best in show.

As for Bernardin’s career, she isn’t going anywhere, she said, and plans to continue to show dogs, including one of Monty’s family members, his 3-year-old half-sister, Pink. So far, Pink has competed in dog shows in Maryland over two weekends in January, according to Bernardin’s show dog Facebook page. On Jan. 11, Pink won best in show at the Annapolis Kennel Club West Friendship dog show, marking her first best in show win, Bernardin said.

“The legacy stands strong,” Bernardin said.

FUNDS

From page A1

provided broad support for K-12 schools, higher education, municipal budgets and nonprofits but also funded an array of specific social service programs.

In his budget proposed, Lamont called for funding some of these programs — either in whole or part — while letting others expire, though it remains unclear a week later how many initiatives fall into each category. A spokesperson said Tuesday the administration does not have a list of ARPA programs that are and aren’t funded in the governor’s budget.

Lamont administration officials have said they plan to permanently fund ARPA programs that have showed results, and in some cases the governor has done so. The highly celebrated Learner Engagement and

Attendance Program, through which outreach workers provide support to students who are chronically absent, is slated to receive nearly \$10 million a year beginning in 2027, under Lamont’s budget proposal.

“Stuff that works, we want to keep funding it,” Jeff Beckham, Lamont’s budget chief, said at a news conference last week. “Stuff that had a useful, short-term, one-time usefulness — that came and went.”

In other instances, though, even well-regarded ARPA programs face an uncertain future. During that news conference, Beckham praised the state’s four urgent crisis centers, which provide immediate mental health services for children, calling them “obviously necessary to keep those kids out of the emergency departments.”

Yet Gary Steck, CEO of Wellmore Behavioral Health, which operates one

of the urgent crisis centers, says the state’s plan to support the program through Medicaid reimbursement would not actually be sufficient to sustain them. He says the four centers require at least \$13.6 million in state grants to stay afloat.

“It was great that Secretary Beckham gave us a shoutout, but the plan they have in the budget will result in all the sites closing,” Steck said in an email.

A spokesperson for the state’s Office of Policy and Management said the governor favors funding the urgent crisis centers through Medicaid because that is typically how state support works for programs that provide health care.

Jeff Vanderploeg, president of the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, had mixed feelings about Lamont’s budget proposal last week. He was frustrated, for example, to see what he considers

inadequate funding for the urgent crisis centers and the consolidation of several other initiatives.

On the other hand, Lamont included permanent funding for a 24/7 mobile crisis intervention service for kids, partially funded by ARPA money, which Vanderploeg considers essential.

“These funds really help not just to offer 24/7/365 accessibility but also to shore up staffing across all hours of availability,” Vanderploeg said. “Mobile crisis really plays a lot of functions within the system, and investing it makes a lot of good sense.”

Beyond specific programs, ARPA money has helped prop up an array of Connecticut institutions in recent years, amid inflation and rising needs for residents. School districts statewide have been forced to cut staff and services, public universities have reduced course offerings and raised

tuition, and towns and cities have looked for places to save.

The same has been true of nonprofits, 60% of whom say they are operating at a deficit, relying on short-term grants to get by, according to a survey the CT Community Nonprofit Alliance released Tuesday.

Last year, the state used \$50 million of ARPA funding to help nonprofits pay staff and maintain their services. Now, they’re asking the state to make that funding permanent and also provide a new cost-of-living adjustment.

“We could address the rising costs all around us due to inflation, and we could retain excellent staff that are currently contemplating other opportunities,” said Dan Osborne, CEO of Gilead Community Services, Inc. “Fund nonprofits and provide us the support that we need to support those that look to us for

help.”

As for where the money might come from, several Democratic lawmakers argued Tuesday the legislature should loosen the state’s fiscal guardrails, beyond what Lamont proposed in his budget. The guardrails are designed to ensure the state puts a certain amount of money toward long-term obligations, but a growing number of lawmakers have come to consider them overly restrictive.

Rep. Anthony Nolan, D-New London, said loosening the guardrails further was “the only way we can really fund what we need to fund, the way it should be.” Rep. Eleni Kavros DeGraw, D-Avon, agreed, saying nonprofit funding is about needs for the state, not just wants.

“We’re talking about the difference between people being able to eat, heat their homes, but their medicine, and exist,” she said.