

JOINT COMMITTEE ON STATE BUILDING CONSTRUCTION

VETERANS CEMETERY*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee recommends introduction of legislation that would authorize the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs to develop a plan to establish, operate and administer one or more state veterans cemeteries in Kansas.

BACKGROUND

This study topic was requested by several individual legislators due to concern about the lack of burial space available in existing cemeteries designated for veterans. Several veterans groups around the state have encouraged the state to address this issue by establishing a state veterans cemetery program.

National Cemeteries

Any honorably discharged veteran with wartime service is eligible for burial in a national veterans' cemetery. The federal Veterans Administration (VA) operates a national cemetery at Leavenworth. The cemetery, which is open to veterans from across the country, is expected to be full in 2015. The VA also runs a national cemetery at Fort Scott; it is not expected to be completely full until 2030 or later. The VA has developed policies for building new veterans' cemeteries based upon veteran populations, but those efforts will focus on states with larger populations than Kansas.

One possibility being discussed at Leavenworth is expansion of the current cemetery onto Leavenworth military hospital grounds. This is characterized as a cost effective alternative for the federal government because it would make use of federal land. However, the plan calls for

several very old buildings to be razed for construction of the cemetery expansion. Concern from historical preservation groups may be an obstacle for the VA in pursuing this option. If the VA decides to expand the cemetery at Leavenworth, the entire expansion would be federally funded. The VA estimates that the expanded cemetery will be capable of servicing the area until 2030 or later.

Military Cemeteries

Military cemeteries are run by the Department of Defense. Under the terms of the National Cemetery Act of 1973, the national cemeteries were turned over to the VA and individual posts were allowed to keep their cemeteries open until they were full. Military cemeteries are open only to those who die while on active duty or to military retirees—a small portion of the veteran population. Fort Riley and Fort Leavenworth each have a military cemetery.

Fort Riley. The military cemetery at Fort Riley is expected to close in mid-1999. It could be granted a waiver of federal policy and allowed to expand slightly. However, this would provide a small number of additional burial spaces which could be filled only by military retirees or those who die while on active duty.

* Proposed legislation not available at time of publication.

State Veterans' Cemetery Program

Under this program the VA subsidizes establishment of a veterans' cemetery. Currently, grants are available for 100 percent of the cost of construction, while land acquisition would be the responsibility of the state. After construction, all of the staffing and operating costs would fall to the state. State veterans' cemeteries are open to veterans, spouses, and eligible dependents. Currently, Kansas does not participate in the state veterans' cemetery program.

Fort Riley. Interest has been expressed in the establishment of a state veterans' cemetery at Fort Riley. It is possible this could be constructed on land donated from the military. No definite agreement has been made and negotiations have not begun. Fort Riley estimates study costs of \$80,000 to determine if the land is suitable for construction of a cemetery.

Fort Dodge. The Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs (KCVA) has approved a change in mission for the cemetery at the Kansas Soldiers' Home at Fort Dodge, allowing the Soldiers' Home to seek a VA grant under the state veterans' cemetery program to expand that cemetery. If the grant is awarded, the cemetery would become a state veterans' cemetery. The current cemetery is open only to residents of the Kansas Soldiers' Home pursuant to informal KCVA policy. If it becomes a state veterans' cemetery, it would be open to any member of the United States Armed Forces who died while in the active military, naval, or air service or was discharged therefrom, other than dishonorable. The state can establish residency requirements for burial at state veterans' cemeteries (as is done currently for residence at the Kansas Soldiers' Home) but these have been successfully challenged. The VA also requires that state veterans' cemeteries conform to its standards and guidelines pertaining to site selection, planning, and construction. The Kansas Soldiers' Home is in the process of applying for a VA grant.

Winfield. Another possible site for a state veterans' cemetery is at the Kansas Veterans

Home currently under construction on the grounds of the former Winfield State Hospital. This cemetery would need to meet all of the requirements for state veterans' cemeteries described above. At this time, no site has been established and no grant applications have been made for construction of a state veterans' cemetery at Winfield.

Veterans in Kansas

The VA estimates 5,895 veterans will die in Kansas in 1999, 5,990 in 2000, and 6,070 in 2001. Estimated numbers of veteran deaths in Kansas peak in 2003 at 6,180, and then decline rapidly; to 3,225 for 2010. The anticipated rise in the death rates has sparked concern from some Kansas veterans' groups about the lack of space in veterans' cemeteries in Kansas. No one has determined the actual demand from veterans wanting to be buried in a veterans' cemetery.

COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

At its October meeting, the Committee received a background memorandum from the Kansas Legislative Research Department describing the types of veterans' cemeteries and the current veterans' cemetery situation in Kansas. The Committee held hearings on this topic in November. Conferees at the hearings included members of the Kansas Legislature and representatives of Kansas veterans' groups who urged the Committee to support establishing a state veterans' cemetery program in cooperation with the VA. Additionally, the Committee received information on the state veterans' cemetery program by a representative of the VA.

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