

Cemetery looks nearby for expansion

Veterans Affairs - Willamette National Cemetery considers 40 acres next door

Monday, April 14, 2008

ALLAN BRETTMAN
The Oregonian Staff

Department of Veterans Affairs officials may need to look no farther than their own backyard to find a successor to Willamette National Cemetery.

A 40-acre parcel at the cemetery's southeast edge has emerged as the first option to buy after Willamette's 268 acres reaches its capacity in about 2020.

A top-ranking Veterans Department official visited the property recently. But he also traveled to two other sites -- Camp Bonneville near Vancouver and a tract 25 miles south of Portland -- and called them front-runners for a longer-term solution for a national cemetery in the Portland area.

"It sure seems a no-brainer" to purchase the property next to the existing cemetery, said William F. Tuerk, under secretary for memorial affairs in the Department of Veterans Affairs. "If we can afford it."

Buying the property next door to Willamette could provide a 30- to 50-year extension on the use of the national cemetery on Portland's east side near Happy Valley, said Tuerk, who visited the Portland area April 3-4 to look at the sites. One of three under secretaries in the Veterans Department, he emphasized that the department isn't acting with a sense of urgency since there are more than 10 years until Willamette is projected to be filled.

Nevertheless, he said the Veterans Department might seek money from Congress later this year to buy and develop land at Willamette as well as other locations in the United States.

The owner of the property next to Willamette told Tuerk that her family would prefer to sell the pasture and forest to the national cemetery, rather than to real estate developers. An additional 20 acres, held by another owner, also might be available for purchase.

The properties are in Clackamas County, as is half of the existing cemetery. The other half of the cemetery, including the front gate, is in Multnomah County.

In addition to that site, Tuerk and Willamette's director, George Allen, visited a pasture at the milepost 278 exit of Interstate 5, about 25 miles south of Portland. Multiple landowners might be interested in selling their properties, totaling 324 acres. Another 80 acres might be available.

Tuerk said he was impressed with the property's accessibility to Interstate 5. Also, the land is mostly flat.

Tuerk told all of the potential sellers that the federal government can pay "fair market appraised value, not more, not less. There won't be a whole lot of negotiating on the price."

The Camp Bonneville property, on the other hand, is expected to be free. Outside Vancouver's eastern edge, it served nearly a century as a military training ground. The government declared the property surplus in 1996, and it was given to Clark County, which plans to turn much of the site into a park with overnight camping.

But that won't happen until a cleanup of unexploded ordnance concludes at least a year from now.

While the land would be free, it's unknown how much additional money, if any, would be needed to make the property safe down to the depth of a gravesite.

Tuerk said it costs "several millions, perhaps \$20 million" initially to transform a barren site into a national cemetery.

"It's early to be thinking about that sort of thing," Tuerk said. "Obviously, we have to be comfortable with our employees and our visitors feeling safe."

Allan Brettman: 360-896-5746 or 503-294-5900; allanbrettman@news.oregonian.com