

## Cemetery is long overdue

Our views

With more military veterans returning from Iraq, and with the death toll mounting daily, Gov. Chris Gregoire and members of the House and Senate are moving quickly to establish the first veterans cemetery in Eastern Washington.

For years, veterans of the armed forces from the Spokane area have asked to have a cemetery available to the 140,000 veterans living in Eastern Washington. The closest facility, Tahoma National Cemetery, is located in Kent, 280 miles from Spokane. That's too far for surviving family members and friends to travel to honor the deceased.

This year, the move to create a cemetery in the Spokane area has gained traction in the Legislature.

It's about time.

In September 2006, as directed by the Legislature, the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs submitted a feasibility study and a business plan for a state veterans' cemetery to be established in Eastern Washington. The federal government guarantees that every veteran can be buried in a national cemetery, but that promise rings hollow when there is no cemetery close at hand.

Senate Bill 5058 would establish the Eastern Washington State Veterans' Cemetery, in which all honorably discharged veterans are entitled to interment. In their testimony before the Senate committees, bill sponsor Sen. Chris Marr, D-Spokane, and John Lee, director of the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs, said Washington state will receive federal funds for the design and construction of the cemetery. The state will pay for the land, with some of that money coming from sales of armed forces license plates.

The two men said the new cemetery is a top priority of veterans groups in Washington state and is long overdue. They noted that two possible sites are being considered, one in Medical Lake and one near Fairchild Air Force Base.

Just a few days after their testimony, SB 5058 was passed by the Senate 48-0.

Rep. Don Barlow, D-Spokane, sponsor of the House bill, notes that the federal Veterans Administration provides grants to build veterans cemeteries within 100 miles of major

metropolitan areas such as Spokane. These grants pay 100 percent of design, construction and equipment costs, but the state is responsible for maintenance and operations costs.

Barlow said 37 percent of the 140,000 veterans in Eastern Washington live in Spokane County. Under the House bill, all honorably discharged veterans and their spouses would be eligible for interment in the new cemetery.

House Bill 1292 was passed by the state House of Representatives on another unanimous vote — 96-0.

Gov. Gregoire said, “During this time of war, it’s important to remember the sacrifice that so many of our service members and their families are making right now.” The governor said creation of the national cemetery legislation is one means of showing veterans how much state residents appreciate their sacrifices.

The governor also is proposing a shared leave pool for state employees who could donate leave to their co-workers who have been called up for military service.

House Bill 1507 and Senate Bill 5430 also are working their way through the legislative system with broad, bipartisan support.

Passing these two measures is the least lawmakers can do for veterans who have sacrificed so much for their state and nation.