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Lawmakers OK veterans cemetery near Spokane

It would serve military east of the Cascades

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By DAVID AMMONS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

OLYMPIA -- Washington will open an \$8 million state veterans cemetery near Spokane to serve veterans and their spouses in the region.

The state Senate Tuesday unanimously approved and sent Gov. Chris Gregoire legislation to authorize Washington's first state-sponsored military cemetery. The measure, championed by the governor's husband, Mike, a veterans advocate, previously passed the House unanimously.

The state has the Tahoma National Cemetery in Kent, but 140,000 veterans live east of the Cascades and deserve a facility in Eastern Washington, said Sen. Chris Marr, D-Spokane. Spokane is about 280 miles from Kent.

While the cemetery will primarily serve Eastern Washington veterans, including the 53,000 who live in Spokane County, agreements with Idaho and Oregon could also open it to their veterans, too.

The veteran population in the region is too small for a federal cemetery, but the Department of Veterans Affairs provides grants to design and build cemeteries near metropolitan areas.

The government will reimburse the state's \$7.5 million worth of construction costs. The governor's new budget also includes about \$450,000 for the project.

The cemetery's annual maintenance and operation costs will be covered by a combination of state, federal and local money, including proceeds from the sale of state armed forces license plates.

Two sites southwest of Spokane near Medical Lake and Fairchild Air Force Base are being considered. Groundbreaking is tentatively scheduled for Veterans Day 2008.

The cemetery will be able to accommodate about 500 burials a year for 50 years, state Veterans Affairs Director John Lee said earlier this year.

The Senate also approved and sent to the governor these measures:

On a unanimous vote, lawmakers approved a measure to require better notification of citizens before their property is condemned for a public purpose through eminent domain.

The bill would require state agencies, cities and counties, school districts and other government entities to send certified letters to property owners before voting to take their property. It would also require publication of advance notice of the meeting in the largest area newspaper.

On a 34-15 vote, senators approved a measure that would ban Washington residents from owning dangerous wild animals such as certain snakes, large cats, wolves, bears, monkeys, primates and crocodiles.

Senators unanimously approved a House bill declaring "Juneteenth" -- June 19 -- to be a state-designated day of remembrance each year to commemorate the ending of slavery in the United States.

Sen. Ed Murray, D-Seattle, said June 19, 1865, is the day Union soldiers landed at Galveston, Texas, with news that the Civil War had ended and that the slaves were free. He said 14 states commemorate the day.

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