

State selects design firm for Eastern Washinton Veterans' cemetery

By CARA LORELLO
Staff Reporter

Washington Department of Veterans Affairs director John E. Lee announced in a statewide press release on Sept. 7 the WDVA has selected Richard H. Celser, Sr., for the position of administrator for the Eastern Washington State Veterans Cemetery, to be located in Medical Lake.

WDVA also selected Bellevue, Wash.-based design firm, JGM Landscape Architects Inc, to develop the cemetery design. WDVA communications director, Heidi Audette, said the department hopes to complete its land purchase by December.

The selected site is located near West Medical Lake by West Hallett and Espanola Roads, currently managed by the state Department of Natural Resources.

"Right now, we are in the process of conducting and reviewing the property appraisal," Audette said. Following the property appraisal, WDVA will sign and purchase a sale agreement to be presented at the November or December Board of Natural Resources meeting, which the board will either approve or disapprove.

"If approved, we would begin the closing process," Audette said.

In May, Gov. Christine Gregoire, state senators and representatives approved the Eastern Washington State Veterans Cemetery budget and House Bill 1292, authorizing WDVA to establish the cemetery, which included \$206,000 in the 2007 operating budget, \$7.8 million in the 2007 capital budget and \$6.899 million in federal state building construction. Annual maintenance and operation costs for the cemetery will be paid through a combination of state, federal and local money.

Except for the \$450,000 used to purchase land, the federal VA grant program will reimburse all capital funds. The state budget also included funding for the recruiting and hiring of a cemetery director.

Officials selected Celser after interviewing six candidates for the administrator position. Celser's appointment officially started on Monday (Sept. 17) via a satellite office at Spokane's Veterans Administration Hospital until construction of the cemetery is underway. Celser is the current director of the Idaho State Veterans Cemetery, a position he's held since 2005, and is a former veterans' service officer for the Idaho State Office of Veterans Advocacy in Boise.

Celser served in the U.S. Air Force from 1966 to 1970, where he obtained the rank of sergeant and an honorable discharge as a disabled Vietnam veteran.

JGM Landscape Architects Inc. designed the Tahoma National Cemetery in Western Washington and principal elements of the master plan for the Idaho State Veterans Cemetery, and Lee said the firm has committed to working closely with the region's veterans community throughout the design process.

JGM Principal Ted Wall said the Eastern Washington cemetery project is one the company has tracked for some time up until funding was approved this year.

When asked about the WDVA's choice for a site location, Wall said in the case of this and past projects, the design approach places much emphasis on preserving and timeless qualities.

"One thing we stressed during our interview [with WDVA] was that we want the structure to respond to the regional architecture of the land," he said.

"There are some interesting topographical features to the land [at West Medical Lake]. For instance there's a lovely butte and, of course, there's Medical Lake, which you'll be able to see from the site—those are things we'll definitely consider within the context of the design."

Efforts to establish a veterans cemetery in Eastern Washington began in 2005 following several years of encouragement by the state's veteran community.

While the area's veteran population was too small to qualify the region for federal requirements as a location for a national cemetery, WDVA considered the option of a state cemetery.

Persistence paid off in 2005 when the Legislature provided funding to conduct a feasibility study on the project.

Site locations owned by a state governmental entity were evaluated based on availability, cost and proximity to services. Spokane County, which according to federal VA population information is home to 37 percent of all veterans living in Eastern Washington, was selected in August 2006 over Yakima and Benton County.

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