

Veterans Day, 2015, marks milestone for local vets



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For all the salutes that rightfully will be displayed Wednesday on Veterans Day, all residents of the Central Coast can take pride in an historic achievement honoring those who have put their lives on the line for our freedoms.

Just eight months ago, ground was broken for the Central Coast Veterans Cemetery, which is in its first phase of development on the former Fort Ord property.

It wasn't easy getting that far, and there's still much more work to come, in terms of raising money and moving through the ever-embattled land-use decisions regarding Fort Ord.

Still, it is altogether fitting that this year, area veterans will be able to take comfort knowing their final earthly resting place will be on the Central Coast, in a location with a long military history, overlooking Monterey Bay.

Many people in the region stepped up to ensure this cemetery became a reality, along with elected officials including state Sen. Bill Monning, D-Carmel, and Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, who helped bring in state and federal government funds totaling nearly \$10 million to get the first phase of the facility underway.

Phase one comprises 17 acres, including 5,000 columbarium niches, a memorial walkway and supporting infrastructure and is scheduled to be completed next July. The full project would include as many as 70,000 burial sites for veterans and their families over a 78-acre expanse. Getting there means getting an estimated \$20 million more, which will mean more money-raising drives and continued support from key leaders along the Central Coast (Carmel Mayor Jason Burnett and Jimmy Panetta, son of former U.S. Secretary of Defense and CIA chief Leon Panetta, spearheaded the first

phase campaign, along with local veterans and supporters). The second phase got a good start, moneywise, with a posthumous gift of \$1.1 million earlier this year from the estate of a Watsonville couple, Robert and Elayne Stein.

The nearest burial site for veterans has been in the Central Valley. The Fort Ord cemetery, which serves veterans and their families from Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Benito counties, is a work in progress dating back years; Monning, for instance, authored six pieces of legislation related to the project since 2008.

Completing the next phase also means that backers will have to continue efforts to keep it from being linked with other Fort Ord reuse developments, such as the controversial Monterey Downs horse racing project.

The veterans cemetery is taking its place with the other military facilities along the Central Coast. In addition to Fort Ord, the Presidio and Naval Postgraduate School, along with the Defense Language Institute on the Monterey Peninsula, have provided training, education and support for people who have chosen to serve their country. And these institutions have enriched the life of the region in other ways — so many local events depend on volunteers from DLI and NPS, for instance.

In July, more than 100 people attended a town hall in Marina hosted by Monning and Assemblyman Mark Stone, D-Scotts Valley, that allowed veterans and their families to ask questions of the legislators and state and local veterans' officials about what would be required to request interment at the future facility.

We cannot imagine a better use of the former Fort Ord land than a cemetery that will honor the men and women who have served and fought for their country. This Veterans Day is a good time to remember that sacrifice — and to support the next phase of the Central Coast Veterans Cemetery.

For more information, go to www.ccvcf.com