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Fort Ord cemetery plans detailed in state report

By Phillip Molnar

SEASIDE >> The state has released its much-anticipated draft environmental assessment for the Fort Ord veterans cemetery, but the battle over it is just beginning.

The Department of State Veterans Affairs details plans, in 629 pages, for roughly 17 acres on the former Army base. They include a ceremonial entrance, columbarium, memorial walk, roads, administration and maintenance complex and assembly areas.

Just the first phase is detailed, not the eventual nearly 80-acre cemetery.

Environmentalists say the assessment is not enough — asking for a full-blown environmental impact report — pitting them against state Sen. Bill Monning, D-Carmel.

The politician has typically received high marks on environmental issues but has increasingly found himself at odds with local activists, especially as he took the lead on the Central Coast Veterans Cemetery.

"The suggestion is that we are somehow cutting corners," he said Tuesday evening. "I invite anyone to read the 600-page report. We are conforming with both state and federal law . . . in no way are we sacrificing environmental integrity of the project."

Monning points to his environmental record in office, as well as his legislation in June last year which delinked funding for the cemetery from any particular project.

"I have the highest ratings possible from all the statewide environmental organizations," he said. "I invite everyone to review my voting record and my commitment to environmental protection."

The Keep Fort Ord Wild group, the most visible watchdog of the former base, says it will request the state perform a much longer and detailed EIR.

Other environmentalists concerned about Fort Ord were still debating their next move Tuesday as they read through the lengthy document.

Keep Fort Ord Wild fears letting the first phase of the popular project through without an EIR will make it easier to move forward with subsequent phases that do not look closely enough at environmental impacts.

"It's a textbook case of piecemealing" the California Environmental Quality Act, Michael Salerno of Keep Fort Ord Wild said. "They are analyzing 17 acres of a 78-acre multi-phase project. The cumulative impacts of the whole project on the complete acreage are not analyzed."

Salerno said his group's opposition is not against the cemetery, but is trying to make sure the public's land gets the proper care.

For example, under the draft assessment the state says it would cut down between 456 and 556 trees for the cemetery's first phase, based on several alternatives.

Salerno said that if a full EIR were done the state would be required to look at all the trees on the site instead of just one portion at a time — taking longer but also giving the public a clearer ideas as to what is going on.

Monning said the assessment reflects the state only having approval and funding for the first phase — not as an attempt to hide something.

"As there is expansion in the approved cemetery area, that does not get a pass on future environmental assessment," he said.

Yet it is not just the usual gatekeepers of the former base who get a say. As a condition of the state's attempted mitigated negative declaration, the public has until July 12 to comment.

THE PLANS

The proposal calls for more than 100 trees to be planted, that mostly native plants be used, that it "reflect the character" of Seaside and Monterey County, and that it use limited water.

The state anticipates two burials a day when completed, bringing 20 to 40 vehicles for each event, and increasing as time goes on.

The draft assessment, prepared by ECORP Consulting in Rocklin, is subject to change and offers alternatives to much of its suggestions.

Some of the highlights of the plan include:

- The main entrance to the project would be on Parker Flats Road about 200 yards east of the intersection with Parker Flats Cut-Off. "Large decorative main entry walls and gates would frame the entrance, to signify the importance of (the cemetery)," the report said.
- Walls would be made of stucco over cement block and capped by red clay, characteristic of the Spanish mission style.
- A committal service shelter would be located on a separate loop road and have an existing grove of oak trees servicing as the backdrop. It is designed to accommodate 30 cars.
- Four roads will be constructed: A Street (one lane, 18 feet wide, accommodates up to 30 vehicles), B Street (two lanes, 28 feet wide, accommodation unclear), C Street (one lane, 30 feet wide, accommodates up to 60 vehicles), and D Street (one lane, 30 feet wide, accommodates up to 30 vehicles).

- A potable water distribution system will be built, with water from the Marina Coast Water District, to be located at Normandy Road and Parker Flats Cut-Off.
- Special events, such as Memorial Day, are expected to generate an average of about 1,000 visitors.
- To minimize potential environmental effects during construction, the state will obtain a permit requiring a stormwater pollution prevention plan.

There are also many contingency plans in case different species or cultural artifacts are found.

The state estimates the project would take about 14 months.

VETERANS

After years of golf tournament fundraisers, Fort Ord Reuse Authority meetings and even an election, longtime supporters are not allowing themselves to celebrate the draft assessment's release.

Janet Parks, past president of the cemetery foundation, said she's staying positive.

"Of course it's a sense of excitement that things are going along," she said. "We are highly optimistic about everything. But, we're keeping our cool because (Keep Fort Ord Wild) is still out there raising a little smoke and steam."

The vice chairman of the county United Veterans Council said the project is now largely out of their hands.

"You just have to put your faith in your state and federal legislators," Jack Stewart said.