

News

Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs

KCVA operates 2 veterans' homes, manages 4 veterans' cemeteries, and assists veterans in receiving benefits.

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KCVA ANNOUNCES TIMELINES FOR STATE VETERANS' CEMETERY AT FORT RILEY

Topeka – The Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs (KCVA) is pleased to announce plans for the final Kansas state veterans' cemetery, to be built on grounds donated by Fort Riley. The official groundbreaking and start of construction will occur in the fall of this year.

In 1999, the Kansas Legislature authorized the KCVA to enter into an agreement with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for the construction of four state veterans' cemeteries in Kansas. Cemeteries are already built and open at Fort Dodge, Winfield, and WaKeeney, and plans are being completed on the fourth cemetery, which will officially be called the State Veterans' Cemetery at Fort Riley.

Governor Kathleen Sebelius is announcing the groundbreaking ceremony will occur on Sunday, November 11, 2007 – Veterans Day. "The creation of the veterans cemetery at Ft. Riley is the culmination of a lot of hard work by veterans, local residents, legislators and the KCVA. It will allow us to honor the memory of the men and women who bravely served our state and nation," she said.

According to Kafer Peele, State Veterans' Cemetery Program director for KCVA, the Fort Riley project was to have been the first in Kansas. Land transfer requirements, however, significantly delayed this cemetery. The federal land was finally passed from the U.S. Army to the State of Kansas in March 2006, and at that point design work went into high gear. The State's plans are now pending final approval with the VA, and the KCVA hopes to put out construction bids in July or August. Actual work could begin as early as October 2007 with the beginning of the federal fiscal year. Cemeteries require almost a year for construction.

Fort Riley donated 90 acres from its southeast training area for this project on land just west of Wildcat Creek Road and south of the Manhattan industrial park. Phase 1 of construction will support operations for a decade, with about a third of the area being fully developed during this initial period. The cemetery is expected to support 11,000 interments in this stage. State veterans' cemeteries give veterans and their families a full range of interment options: in-

ground casket burials, above-ground columbarium walls, in-ground cremains burials, and a scattering garden with memorial wall.

Under the state veterans' cemetery concept, the federal government fully funds the construction of the cemetery and furnishes all necessary equipment. Phase 1 is expected to bring approximately \$7 million to the state for this purpose. Once construction is complete, the state performs all burials and maintains the cemetery in perpetuity.

"Our cemeteries are kept to the highest standards," says Peele. "They are memorials and shrines to the men and women who have served this country."

The KCVA appreciates the strong and patient support of local residents from Fort Riley, Junction City, Manhattan, and the surrounding area who began discussions on this cemetery eight years ago. A dedicated, informal working group linked up with state and federal legislators to bring this concept to life, and with design approval now a few months away, construction will soon follow. The KCVA also appreciates the roles of Riley County and the City of Manhattan in integrating utilities with the site.

Once the final plans are approved, George Webb, executive director of the KCVA, will have a public briefing so local residents can see what a beautiful cemetery will be built and made available to veterans. Webb understands how site selection challenges, flood plains, federal rules, and requirements for explosive ordinance and environmental surveys had all complicated and delayed the land transfer. Even after those were solved, the process took more time. "We are looking forward to approval of the plan and the beginning of construction," Webb said.

The Fort Riley leadership has been concerned that the post cemetery is almost out of space. In addition, the post facility can only support retirees and those personnel who die on active duty – and their dependents. A state veterans' cemetery has much broader eligibility options, covering veterans who served honorably on active duty or are retirement eligible from the reserve components, as well as their dependents.

Besides the four state veterans' cemeteries, Kansas has national cemeteries in Leavenworth, Fort Leavenworth, and Fort Scott.

Media Note: For more information, please contact George Webb or Kafer Peele at 785-296-3976.