

Proposed Taos vets cemetery in the works

By Cody Hooks

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A dream to build a veterans cemetery in Taos County has been in the works for the last seven years. If plans by the county government come to fruition, that dream could be realized sooner rather than later.

But as Commissioner Gabe Romero said in a Jan. 6 commissioners meeting — “it’s a gamble.”

The proposed 20-acre Taos County veterans cemetery plan hinges on a lot of factors — the governor, federal government and a critical mass of funding. If one factor has stayed constant for supporters, it’s the need for such a cemetery for rural New Mexican veterans.

Gov. Susana Martinez initiated a statewide plan in 2014 to fund cemeteries for rural New Mexican veterans and their spouses who live a great distance from the national cemeteries at Santa Fe, Fort Bayard near Silver City and Fort Bliss in Texas.

“It’s a hardship for our people to go all the way to Santa Fe to visit our loved ones,” said Francis Crdova, commander of the local Disabled American Veterans chapter and one of the people who first pushed for a local veterans cemetery.

A U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs stipulation requiring 100,000 veterans to live within 75 miles of a proposed cemetery for it to be built has thus far quelled efforts to establish more veterans cemeteries in New Mexico. But Gov. Martinez’ plan — calling for small-scale cemeteries of only three to five acres — makes sense within New Mexico’s vast, rural landscape.

According to the master plan prepared by Henry Architects, a local firm, and presented to the county commission Jan. 6, the proposed cemetery would accommodate Taos County’s roughly 2,550 veterans, as well as the 6,331 veterans who live in the adjacent counties of Rio Arriba, Colfax, Los Alamos and Mora.

Furthermore, according to County Manager Stephen Archuleta, the Taos veterans cemetery would have an anticipated lifespan of at least 75 years before it filled to capacity.

Yet Taos County was passed over in 2014 for the governor’s program. Her administration chose four sites, including one in Angel Fire, as priority locales for rural veterans cemeteries. Only one of those sites, Gallup, was chosen by the Department of Veterans Affairs to receive funding. Martinez’ administration will likely resubmit a list of possible cemeteries again this year.

Taos County is maneuvering itself to get on that list — and if it doesn't, to get national recognition and funding anyhow.

The county owns a 20-acre lot on County Road 110, west of the UNM-Taos Klauer campus, slated for the cemetery's development. According to Archuleta, the lot was dedicated for the veterans cemetery twice — the first time six years ago, then again around 2012.

For comparison, the Santa Fe National Cemetery is about 34 acres, according to the National Parks Service.

Thus far, the budget for the Taos cemetery has come from capital outlay funds — those awarded by the legislature for specific projects within particular communities. Taos County received approximately \$170,000 in bonds over two legislative sessions. The larger portion of bonds, worth \$100,000, has yet to sell because of an unsatisfactory audit of the county last year. According to County Finance Manager Anita Padilla during the Jan. 6 meeting, those bonds are set to be sold in the coming several months.

Taos County spent \$8,493 to have the land surveyed and to have David Henry, of Henry Architects, create the cemetery master plan.

The schematics were presented to the county at the Jan. 6 commissioners meeting. They call for a total of 2,430 burial sites “spread over seven distinct sections of the cemetery,” which will also feature 1,280 niches for cremated remains. The cemetery would have a memorial walk, an open-air structure for services, a bell tower and an avenue of flags.

The plans also call for a fence surrounding the cemetery, as well as irrigated turf in the burial areas and native landscaping surrounding it.

The 20-acre, high-desert cemetery comes with a hefty price tag. According to the master plan, the estimated total “hard cost,” including all labor, materials, overhead and profit, is approximately \$4.7 million.

Commissioner Romero said in the Jan. 6 meeting, “We’re probably much more ahead of folks at the state level government.”

Henry followed saying, “We have the tools to show that we’re serious about this project.”

Henry’s plans would meet the national standards for the federal Department of Veterans Affairs. Archuleta told *The Taos News* in an interview Jan. 22 that in a perfect scenario, the cemetery would be selected, financed and operated by the VA.

Picking up such support for the 20-acre dream, Henry said, will take extensive lobbying. Not only will county officials pursue support from the Martinez administration, but they will also advocate for the plan in late February when they travel to Washington, D.C., to meet with the New Mexico congressional delegation.

The payoff of federal backing would be enormous. Like the Gallup cemetery picked from the list of four New Mexico proposals, the state would front 10 percent of the total cost while the Department of Veterans Affairs would pay for the other 90 percent. The initial 10 percent investment by the state could potentially be reimbursed by the federal government.

However, should the VA not elect to sponsor the proposed cemetery the county would fall back on other means of building and managing the cemetery, according to Archuleta.

An adjacent 18 acres owned by the county could be developed as a public cemetery for civilians, he said, with revenue generated by selling lots to the public offsetting the cost of the veterans cemetery. The county commission would still need to approve such a civilian cemetery for the two resting places to open concurrently sometime by 2017 — when the current pool of bond money reaches its expiration date.

Plus, Archuleta said, the county would continue to lobby for capital outlay funding at the state level. He told *The Taos News* the county might come by another \$100,000 in bonds by the end of the 2015 legislative session.

Archuleta said starting the infrastructure, such as roads and fencing along the perimeter of the cemetery, would definitely take care of the money on hand.

Commissioner Tom Blankenhorn told a handful of veterans at the Jan. 6 meeting, “I think we share the vision to make this thing happen. And we will continue step by step.”

Archuleta told *The Taos News* that under current anti-donation statutes, the county would have to charge the families of veterans to be buried in the proposed cemetery. A proposed “veteran exemption” could come before the voters of New Mexico in 2016 should the legislature approve such a change during this legislative session — something Archuleta said was in the works with state Sen. Carlos Cisneros.

“I can’t see charging vets who served their county to be buried. I can’t see it,” Archuleta said.

Archuleta said a ground-breaking on the veterans cemetery could happen as soon as this summer.