



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON DC 20420

The Honorable Ken Salazar
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Salazar:

Thank you for your letter of June 5, 2006, concerning the establishment of a national veterans cemetery in the Pike's Peak region of Colorado, a region that includes Colorado Springs and Fort Carson. I am responding because I oversee the development and operation of our Nation's 123 Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) national cemeteries.

As you know, VA's strategic plan calls for us to provide a burial option in a national or State veterans cemetery to 90 percent of the veteran population by 2010. A burial option means that a cemetery with available grave space is located within a 75-mile radius of the veteran's residence. Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver, Colorado, is within 75 miles of Colorado Springs, and it is fully able to serve the needs of area veterans. We have plans to build new national cemeteries only in areas where there are at least 170,000 veterans not served by an existing cemetery within 75 miles of the proposed site. Since most veterans in the Colorado Springs area live within 75 miles of Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver, the area does not meet our criterion. Accordingly, we have no current plans to construct a new national cemetery in the Colorado Springs area.

I would also like to note that the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is completely engaged in a truly significant expansion effort. Two recent public laws, Pub. L. No. 108-109 and Pub. L. No. 106-117, directed us to establish 12 new national cemeteries. Of the 12, we have fully completed Phase 1 of just one cemetery—Ft. Sill near Oklahoma City. Three others—serving Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Atlanta—are open but work continues on completion of Phase 1. Two other cemeteries that will serve Sacramento and South Florida area veterans are under construction. We are working to acquire sites and begin design for the six others called for by Pub. L. No. 108-109. We are also working on several major construction projects needed to develop available land in order to keep existing cemeteries open.

We are also initiating a major programmatic review of all memorial benefits, including our policy regarding the siting of potential new cemeteries. That review will consider all of the factors that you mentioned in your letter, including travel time to existing cemeteries and unusual concentrations of veteran population because of the presence of active military installations.

I urge veterans in the Colorado Springs area to investigate VA's State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP). The SCGP is a viable option to enhance the availability of burial service for veterans in the Colorado Springs and Fort Carson region. In fact, other states have recently taken advantage of the grant program to establish veterans cemeteries to service Ft. Hood, Texas, Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, Ft. Knox, Kentucky, Ft. Huachuca, Arizona, Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, Louisiana, and several other similar areas. The SCGP does not

Page 2

The Honorable Ken Salazar

impose a limitation on the number of cemeteries that can be established within a State, nor does the program require a minimum population threshold for new cemeteries. VA can pay for up to 100 percent of the construction and initial equipment costs for a new cemetery. VA does not pay for land. Cemeteries established under the grant program must conform to the standards and guidelines pertaining to site selection, planning, construction, and operational standards prescribed by VA. The State is responsible for operations and maintenance. Enclosed is a fact sheet on the SCGP for your information. You may also visit the Web site at <http://www.cem.va.gov/grants.htm> for information on the SCGP.

I hope that this information is helpful to you and provides a better understanding of our policy and resource constraints when considering the establishment of a new national cemetery.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William F. Tuerk". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

William F. Tuerk

Enclosure