

500-year-old tree at risk in Crown Hill cemetery fight

John Tuohy, john.tuohy@indystar.com 6:41 a.m. EDT September 29, 2016



(Photo: Provided by the National Cemetery Administration)

Environmentalists and neighborhood groups are making a last-ditch effort to stop a plan at Crown Hill Cemetery to raze 15 acres of trees and build a national veterans' monument and cemetery.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs will host a meeting Thursday night where citizens can voice their positions on a plan to build the VA monument along Crown Hill property on 42nd Street that is one of the oldest forests in the Midwest. It includes a 500-year-old oak tree.

The meeting is at 7 p.m. at the Indiana War Memorial, 431 N. Meridian St.

Anne Laker, a director at the Indianapolis-based Indiana Forest Alliance, said objectors probably cannot legally stop the cemetery but hope to bring public pressure on the VA to find a different location. She said several groups, including many veterans, have joined the fight to save the forest of hickory and oak trees, home to deer, coyotes and hawks.

"It is really hard for the public to understand why this land has to go when there is clearly other acreage," Laker said. "This project that will displace the only old growth forest in inner city Indianapolis."

The monument, called a "columbarium cemetery," would hold about 2,500 urns, with room to grow and hold 25,000 urns, for veterans and eligible relatives. It would include a main entrance from 42nd Street, a wall, a parking lot, roads, a shelter and a public restroom. The VA's National Cemetery Administration bought the parcel from Crown Hill for \$800,000 last fall. Construction, scheduled to begin next April, would take about 18 months.

The 14 acres of forest are just a portion of the 70 acres of trees in that section of Crown Hill. An environmental impact study by the VA found that the tree clear would disturb no endangered or threatened species, and the animals have plenty of places to go on the cemetery's 555 acres.

"The proposed property is wooded with many large trees," according to the environmental study. "It appears to have remained undisturbed for a very long time; possibly for more than 300 years given the size and probable age of some of the trees. There is an extraordinarily large bur oak tree (*Quercus macrocarpa*) located within the boundary of one of the wetlands that may be more than 500 years old."

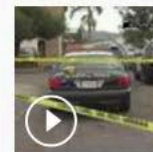
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Crown Hill is privately owned, but this is at least the second time a plan to develop its own property has met community opposition. Ten years ago, a developer pulled his plans to build a 300-acre residential complex on the same north end of the cemetery.

The cemetery opponents this time include the Sierra Club Heartlands Group, the Crown Hill Neighborhood Association and the School for Community Learning.

Cemetery President Keith Norwalk did not return calls Wednesday.

The coalition complained that the process for approval of the site plan did not include public hearings, though they concede it was properly advertised. The opponents lobbied Indiana's congressional delegation for help, which ultimately persuaded the VA to hold the public meeting.

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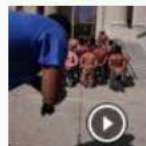
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The Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Secretary
United States Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

I am writing in regard to the intended construction of a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) national cemetery in Indianapolis, where the creation of columbaria is planned on the north side of Crown Hill Cemetery.

I am proud of the men and women who have served our country, and one of my top priorities in Congress is to ensure veterans are honored with the care and respect they deserve. As such, I appreciate the VA's decision to select Indianapolis as a national cemetery site to serve tens of thousands of Hoosier veterans and their families in Central Indiana.

The successful completion of this project, however, will require sufficient input both from veterans as well as the local community. As plans for the columbarium cemetery progress, I ask that you continue to engage with all Hoosiers and listen to their thoughts and concerns about construction of the memorial. Thank you for your continued commitment to our nation's veterans. Please reach out to my office if we may provide any assistance.

Sincerely,



Joe Donnelly
United States Senator

cc: Colonel Christopher G. Beck, Commander, Louisville District Army Corps of Engineers
Mr. Glenn Madderom, Chief of Cemetery Development and Improvement Service,
National Cemetery Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs
Mr. John Kays, Crown Hill Project Manager, National Cemetery Administration,
Department of Veterans Affairs

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"As plans for the columbarium cemetery progress, I ask that you continue to engage with all Hoosiers and listen to their thoughts and concerns about construction of the memorial," U.S. Sen. Joe Donnelly, D-Ind., requested in his letter.

Laker said U.S. Sen. Dan Coats and U.S. Rep. Susan Brooks, both R-Ind., also wrote letters to the VA.

Glenn Madderom, director of the cemetery development and improvement service for the VA, said the cemetery is desperately needed in Indianapolis because the nearest national veterans' cemetery is in Marion, more than an hour's drive away.

"This is to better serve the 250,000 veterans living in Central Indiana whose families now have to drive a long way," Madderom said.

Crown Hill was the logical choice for the monument because it already has a national cemetery where 2,000 veterans are buried, Madderom said. But it has been full since 1959 and closed to new burials.

The Crown Hill site also would help the VA keep up with the trend toward cremation, which now accounts for about 50 to 60 percent of all interments. Indianapolis is one of five cities adding cremation cemeteries. Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York City are the others.

Madderom said the site plan has met all required standards. He added that public hearings were not required because the development is on private land already zoned for cemetery use.

"There are no zoning changes needed," he said.

In fact, the environmental report warned that Crown Hill could have sold the land to anyone, and the consequences could have been worse.

"If the VA does not purchase the land, then the property will likely remain for sale and another type of development will eventually occur," wrote the ASC Group of Indianapolis. "The Proposed Action by the VA has the potential to provide protection, in perpetuity, of many natural features in the woodland by retaining the old growth trees, through context sensitive design."

Madderom agreed. "On any site, some trees have to be removed," he said. "But here we can continue to provide a peaceful and serene environment."

But Laker urged the VA to look elsewhere.

"I am 100 percent certain there are plenty of options," she said. "The city owns plenty of property they might want to unload. We all understand the value of trees to our urban landscape. The VA bought this property and did not do authentic outreach to neighbors."

Call IndyStar reporter John Tuohy at (317) 444-6418. Follow him on Twitter

[@John_tuohy](#).

