

Group mobilizing to save Crown Hill Cemetery forest

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(Photo: Holly Hays/IndyStar)

A steady stream of people filed through the doors of the Martin Luther King Community Center.

The center, overlooking the expanse of Crown Hill Cemetery, was filled with dozens of members of the [Indiana Forest Alliance](#) and community members, gathered to save the trees of the cemetery's north woods.

Before the meeting convened, one attendee turned a yellowed piece of paper to the crowd that was met with several quiet cheers.

“Environmentalists make terrible neighbors, but great ancestors.”

The two-hour discussion heard concerns from veterans, environmentalists and residents regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs' [plans to build a new memorial](#) in a nearly 15-acre expanse of the north woods.

Representatives from the VA were not in attendance, but one representative from Sen. Joe Donnelly's office told the group he'd be taking the comments back to the senator.

Plans for the monument, to be located near 42nd Street and Clarendon Road, were announced in September 2015 after the land was sold to the VA for \$810,000.

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The above-ground monument would hold about 2,500 urns, expanding over time to hold at least 25,000 urns for veterans and eligible relatives. It also would include a main entrance from 42nd Street, a wall, parking lot, roads, shelter and a public restroom.

In a news release announcing the purchase, VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald called the cemeteries "national treasures and sacred shrines that honor the brave men and women who sacrificed for our country."

Jeff Piper, the meeting's emcee and a veteran, said the trees are an important part of Hoosier history.

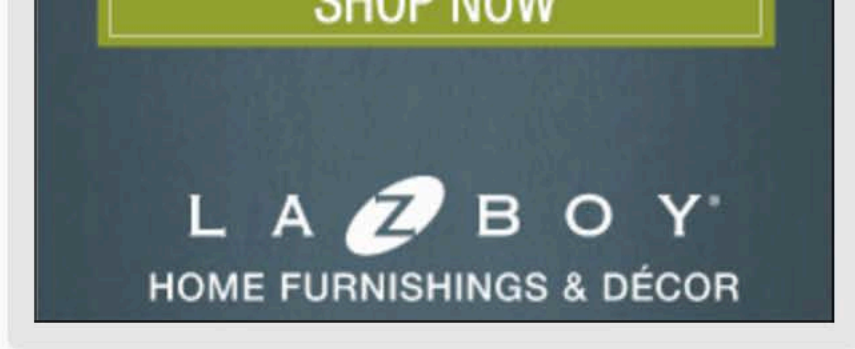
"We have 233,204 acres in Marion County," he said. "We were founded in 1821, and some of those trees were there before we were ever founded."

Piper said the nearly \$810,000 spent by the VA to buy the land would be better used to serve veterans in need in Indianapolis.

Twenty-two veterans a day commit suicide, he told the group. He shook his head. He's beside himself, he said.

"The reason they're killing themselves and they're helping to fill the cemeteries with them is the lack of funding for outreach," he said. "So instead, let's spend the money to tear down a 300-year-old tree to build a monument for dead people, when they're not spending any money to save the live ones."

Much of the frustration expressed at the meeting teetered between lack of public input on the project and concern over the environmental and historical impact of the construction. The Indiana Forest Alliance wants to see a new environmental assessment.

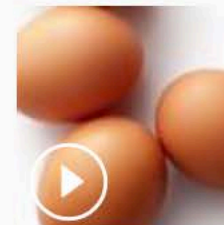


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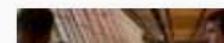
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Tom Dolan, a biology professor at Butler University, spoke about the ecological value of the trees in the cemetery. The woods are more than just 3-foot-wide trees.

“While we all can recognize and appreciate the value of huge trees, but it’s a full forest system,” he said. “And it’s an old forest system.”

Several veterans took the microphone to discuss their feelings about the project.

One, Marine Corps veteran Corrie Jagger, said she doesn’t talk much about her time in the service, but it gives her a unique perspective on the “initially well-intended” memorial for deceased service members.

“There are other areas in this city that could be used to honor us as veterans posthumously and in a way that we would be re-honoring the earth as well, by revitalizing these areas rather than destroying something so significant,” she said.

Jeff Stant, executive director of the IFA, said the group is exploring all of its options. It has been in contact with state representatives, congressmen, VA officials — anyone who will listen. The alliance wants a new environmental assessment. Lawyers have been contacted. Protests are being considered.

The members want to have their voices heard, and they’re going to keep fighting until someone listens.

“It isn’t over until the fat lady sings, folks,” Stant said.

The IFA will lead a walk through the north woods of Crown Hill Cemetery at 3 p.m. Sept. 25, weather permitting. For more information, visit the IFA’s [website](#).

IndyStar reporter Vic Ryckaert contributed to this story.

Call IndyStar reporter Holly Hays at (317) 444-6156. Follow her on

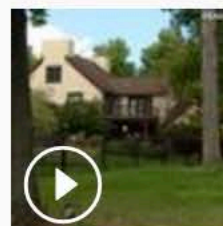
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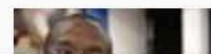
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