

## Irvine City Council votes to build veterans cemetery near El Toro Y

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5 COMMENTS

### Veterans cemetery will be located near El Toro Y

*The Irvine City Council, in a 3-2 vote, approves a resolution re-designating the "strawberry fields" as the site of the future veterans cemetery.*



By Irvine City News staff

The Irvine City Council, in a special meeting that took place on the 73rd anniversary of D-Day, today approved by a 3-2 vote the "strawberry fields" near the 5 and 405 freeways as the site of the future Southern California Veterans Cemetery.

Mayor Don Wagner and council members Melissa Fox and Christina Shea voted to move the proposed cemetery from a site north of the Great Park to the alternate site near the intersection of the 5 and 405 freeways, south of the park. Mayor Pro Tem Lynn Schott and Councilmember Jeff Lalloway opposed the action.

As the city clerk announced the 3-2 vote in favor of the "strawberry field" site, veterans leader Bill Cook and a large contingent of veterans stood, cheered and applauded.



Upon learning of the decision, FivePoint CEO and Chairman Emile Haddad issued this statement: "The Irvine council's decision is a win-win-win for the city at large, our communities and, most importantly, the veterans who deserve a special place to honor their own, a cemetery that is worthy of the service they have given this country." Haddad added, "FivePoint stands ready to help the city and state expedite the building of the cemetery. We are excited and proud to help deliver on the promise made to the veterans."

In front of a standing-room-only crowd that included veterans and community and city leaders, statements from elected officials not at the meeting were read that unanimously endorsed the land exchange and the approval of the alternate site for the veterans cemetery. Statements were entered into the record from Orange County Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Michelle Steel, Congressman Lou Correa, State Senator Josh Newman and Assemblyman Steven Choi, all in favor of the freeway-adjacent alternate site near the El Toro Y, known as the "strawberry fields."

Of the 55 individuals who offered public comments at the three-and-a-half hour meeting—the third in two months on the topic—32 were in favor of the "strawberry fields" site, while 21 favored the ARDA site. Two were neutral.

Prior to the public comments, as well as after, the five council members heatedly debated the issue.

After sharing that the state's funding came in \$10 million less than anticipated, Mayor Don Wagner said, "Neither the state government nor the federal government is willing to be an equal partner." The federal government had suggested it would consider adding \$10 million to the project, but, Wagner said, "That amount has not been committed to us...We are quite low on the federal priority list and waiting for that funding could further delay (the project)."

Councilmember Jeff Lalloway, who admitted to not reading a document submitted yesterday by land developer FivePoint that included details about its commitment to the alternate site, called the alternate site proposal a "backroom deal." He said he would ask for a delay and postponement of the vote. "I'll be making a motion to put this off for another meeting," he said, citing traffic as a major concern.

"That dramatic misrepresentation of what is going on here is pretty sad," said Councilmember Christina Shea in response to Lalloway's comments. "There is nothing about this proposal tonight that will stop any process going forward through the proper channels." Shea added, "The state knows the money's not there. Sharon Quirk Silva knows the money's not there." Shea said she didn't want to see the city have to foot the bill.

Mayor Pro Tem Lynn Schott, who arrived late to the meeting, like Lalloway pushed for a delay, saying more questions needed to be answered. "Why are we in such a hurry?" she questioned.

Lalloway twice during the meeting proposed a substitute motion to delay the decision several weeks so the issue could be studied further. Schott supported the substitute motion each time but it failed to win approval for lack of a third vote.

Councilmember Melissa Fox spoke passionately in favor of the alternate site, saying, "We owe this to our veterans and I will fight to make sure that it is done." She added, "When we do that (move the cemetery site to the strawberry fields) we save the city \$38 million." Fox noted that the funds saved could fund other amenities in the city and that building the cemetery at the new site would be "a beacon of honor for this city."

The debate over which site is the best location for the cemetery has been ongoing for three years, with one contingent pushing hard for the ARDA site. That location, with more than 70 structures, portions of remaining runway and underground utilities, would have required extensive demolition before construction could begin. The total cost to build a cemetery at the ARDA site was estimated to be nearly \$80 million. In contrast, the "strawberry fields" site is currently used only for farmland. No demolition is required and construction could begin immediately upon approval and at much less cost.

FivePoint owns the freeway-adjacent farmland on the alternate site. After being approached by Councilmember Shea and the Orange County Veterans Memorial Park Foundation almost 18 months ago with a proposal to exchange the land at the ARDA site for the alternate site, the company agreed.

Bill Cook, a Marine Corps Vietnam veteran and chairman of the Orange County Veterans Memorial Park Foundation, reminded the council that, "Today is the 73rd anniversary of D-Day." He told the council that a vote in favor of the "strawberry fields" site would be history making. "Today...you have the unique opportunity to create hallowed ground," he said.