FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
PROPOSED CHATTANOOGA NATIONAL CEMETERY REPLACEMENT
CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE AREA

Introduction

A Final Environmental Assessment (EA), included herein by reference, was prepared to identify, analyze, and document the potential physical, environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic impacts associated with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) proposed acquisition of approximately 225 to 270 acres of land for the construction of and operation of a new National Cemetery in the Chattanooga, Tennessee area to replace the existing Chattanooga National Cemetery. The Final EA evaluated the site acquisition and the initial phase of cemetery development (approximately 40 to 60 acres). Supplemental NEPA analyses will be conducted for subsequent phases of cemetery development. The EA was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 ([NEPA]; 42 United States Code 4321 *et seq*.), the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1500-1508), and *Environmental Effects of the Department of Veterans Affairs Actions* (38 CFR Part 26).

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to establish a new National Cemetery of sufficient size and capacity to serve the burial needs of Veterans and their family members in the Chattanooga area for at least the next 100 years.

The Proposed Action is needed to ensure the burial needs of area Veterans are met once the burial space at the existing Chattanooga National Cemetery is exhausted. The existing Chattanooga National Cemetery is the only National Cemetery in the region and is nearing its burial capacity; VA estimates that the existing burial space at the cemetery will be depleted in 10 years.

1. Description of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action is to acquire at least 200 acres of land within a 30-mile radius of downtown Chattanooga for the construction and operation of a new replacement cemetery for the Chattanooga National Cemetery. The new cemetery would provide burial facilities for Veterans and eligible family members in the Chattanooga area for at least 100 years.

VA would acquire the land in 2022 and would begin the cemetery master planning and design approximately six months after site acquisition. The master planning and design process is anticipated to require two years. VA would follow the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) *Facilities Design Guide* in the proposed National Cemetery design. The cemetery would include a gated entrance and perimeter fencing, an administration and public information building, an assembly area, a memorial wall, committal shelters, a loop road through the cemetery, casket gravesites, columbarium niches, and a maintenance building/facility. The cemetery would be developed in phases, with the first phase (approximately 40 to 60 acres) including the buildings and infrastructure needed to support the first 15 years of burial capacity. It is anticipated the first phase of cemetery development would be completed within two years of the completion of the cemetery design and the cemetery would open in approximately 2027.

The proposed National Cemetery would be open to the public every day throughout the year. VA anticipates approximately 15 to 25 funeral processions per week at the cemetery, averaging approximately 10 to 20 cars per procession. VA estimates that the cemetery, once fully established, would receive approximately 300 to 400 visitors per day.

Alternatives Considered

VA initially considered the expansion of the existing Chattanooga National Cemetery; however, land contiguous to the cemetery is fully developed and was not available to acquire. As a result, VA concluded that a new replacement National Cemetery near Chattanooga best suited its purpose and need to fully serve the burial needs of area Veterans.

In 2021, VA published a Solicitation for Federal Business Opportunity (FBO) seeking offers for at least 150 acres of land suitable for cemetery development within 30 miles of downtown Chattanooga. VA received several responses to the advertisement. Through a comprehensive screening process, VA identified two suitable sites that best met the established screening criteria.

The EA examined in depth two Action Alternatives for the implementation of the Proposed Action (Site 1 and Site 2) and the No Action Alternative.

Proposed Action Alternatives

Proposed Action Alternative 1 – Site 1: Site 1 consists of approximately 270 acres of land located south of the intersection of Hiwassee Highway and Chickamauga Lake/Tennessee River in an unincorporated area of Meigs County, Tennessee, approximately 29 miles northeast of downtown Chattanooga. Site 1 is located in a rural area consisting of mostly agricultural and low-density residential properties. Site 1 consists of unimproved agricultural land and wooded land. A small overgrown, derelict cemetery (Old Browder Cemetery) is located in an area of trees in the central portion of the site, but is located on its own 0.46-acre parcel that is not part of the site. Old Browder Cemetery would remain in place as an independent cemetery located within the National Cemetery.

Proposed Action Alternative 2 – Site 2: Site 2 consists of approximately 225 acres of land located northeast of the intersection of Bostontown Road and Kelly Cross Road in an unincorporated area of Sequatchie County, Tennessee, approximately 25 miles north of downtown Chattanooga. Site 2 is located in a rural area consisting of mostly agricultural land and low-density residential properties. The site is mostly unimproved agricultural land and wooded land with a house and two sheds located in the western portion of the site. The residence and associated structures would likely be removed during initial cemetery development. An intermittent stream is located in the western portion of the site and McWilliams Creek runs along the eastern site boundary.

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, the Proposed Action would not be implemented. NCA would continue to provide burial services at the existing Chattanooga National Cemetery until the existing capacity is reached, after which the cemetery would be maintained and open for visitors, but would be closed for new interments. Veterans and their families residing in the Chattanooga area would no longer be served by a proximate National Cemetery and would be required to travel a substantial distance for burial at a National Cemetery. The Action Alternative sites would likely remain mostly undeveloped agricultural land for the foreseeable future.

2. Environmental Analysis

Environmental Consequences

Proposed Action

The Final EA concluded that the Proposed Action would result in potential short-term and/or long-term adverse impacts to aesthetics, air quality, geology and soils, hydrology and water quality, wildlife and habitat, noise, land use, wetlands, solid waste and hazardous materials, transportation, utilities, and environmental justice. All of these potential impacts are less than significant and would be further reduced through careful implementation of the general best management practices (BMPs); management, minimization, and avoidance measures; and compliance with regulatory requirements, as identified in the Final EA.

The Proposed Action Alternatives would enable VA to provide proximate National Cemetery burial benefits to the regional Veteran community for at least 100 years after the existing Chattanooga National Cemetery interment space is depleted, a significant beneficial socioeconomic effect.

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, the Proposed Action would not be implemented. No beneficial impacts attributable to the Proposed Action would occur. Veterans and their families residing in the Chattanooga area would continue to use Chattanooga National Cemetery until space is no longer available. Once Chattanooga National Cemetery reaches capacity, Veterans and their families in the region would be required to travel much longer distances to the nearest National Cemetery for burial and subsequent visits, at increased cost and time.

Cumulative Impacts

The Final EA also examined the potential cumulative effects of implementing each of the considered alternatives. This analysis found that the Proposed Action Alternatives, with the implementation of the BMPs; management, minimization, and avoidance measures; and regulatory compliance measures specified in the Final EA, would not result in significant adverse cumulative impacts to the human environment.

Management, Minimization and Mitigation Measures

VA will include the BMPs; management, minimization and avoidance measures; and regulatory compliance measures summarized in Table 4-1 of the Final EA (attached herein as Appendix A) in the Proposed Action to minimize and maintain adverse effects at less-than-significant levels.

3. Regulations

The Proposed Action will be consistent with federal, state, and local environmental regulations, including those listed in Appendix A of the Final EA.

4. Commitment to Implementation

VA affirms its commitment to implement the BMPs; management, minimization and avoidance measures; and regulatory compliance measures identified in the Final EA and this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

5. Agency and Public Involvement

VA has consulted with appropriate federal, state, and local regulatory agencies, and federally recognized Native American Tribes identified as having possible ancestral ties to the Site 1 and

Site 2 areas. This consultation is documented in the Final EA. Comments and input submitted by regulatory agencies and Tribes have been addressed in the Final EA.

VA published and distributed the Draft EA for a 30-day public comment period, as announced by a Notice of Availability (NOA) published in the Chattanooga Times Free Press, a local newspaper of general circulation, on March 20 and 23, 2022. A copy of the Draft EA was made available for public review on the VA Office of Construction and Facilities Management Environmental Program website. VA also emailed notification of the Draft EA for review and comment, with a link to the Draft EA on VA's website, to each of the government agencies and Tribes that were contacted during the NEPA scoping and Section 106 consultation, and State and Federal congressional representatives. The TDEC APC and a Tennessee State Senator provided comments on the Draft EA. These comments were considered in preparing the Final EA, as appropriate.

6. Finding of No Significant Impact

After careful review of the Final EA, VA has concluded that the Proposed Action would not generate significant controversy or have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, provided VA implements the BMPs; management, minimization and avoidance measures; and regulatory compliance measures identified in Appendix A to this FONSI. VA will implement these measures.

This analysis fulfills the requirements of the NEPA and is consistent with the VA and CEQ regulations implementing the Act. An environmental impact statement is not required.

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Mr. Stephan J. Frank
Executive Director, NCA Southeast District
VA National Cemetery Administration

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Date: 2022.05.24 07:43:54 -04'00'

Mr. Fernando L. Fernández, REM
Environmental Engineer
Environmental Program Office
VA Office of Construction & Facilities Management

Management, Minimization, and Avoidance Measures
Incorporated into the Proposed Action

Technical Resource Area	Measure
Aesthetics	Develop the cemetery in concert with the site's natural topography. Maintain some natural areas.
	Use natural buffers and/or berms between the developed portions of the cemetery and adjacent residential properties.
Air Quality	Use appropriate dust suppression methods (such as the use of water, dust palliative, covers, suspension of earth moving in high wind conditions) during onsite construction activities.
	Stabilize disturbed areas through re-vegetation or mulching if the areas would be inactive for several weeks or longer. Specific requirements would be identified in the Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP).
	Implement measures to reduce diesel particulate matter emissions from construction equipment, such as reducing idling time and using newer equipment with emissions controls.
	Comply with the applicable Tennessee Department of Environmental Conservation (TDEC), Air Pollution Control regulations, as applicable.
Cultural and Historic Resources	Should potentially historic or culturally significant items be discovered during project construction, the construction contractor would immediately cease work until VA, a qualified archaeologist, Tennessee State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), Tribes and other consulting parties are contacted to properly identify and appropriately treat discovered items in accordance with applicable state and federal laws.
	Maintain, mark, and fence a buffer around Old Browder Cemetery (Site 1) to prevent inadvertent disturbance during construction. Provide reasonable access to the old cemetery by family members of the deceased.
Geology, Topography, and Soils	Control soil erosion and sedimentation impacts during construction by implementing erosion prevention measures and complying with the TDEC General National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Permit for Discharges of Stormwater Associated with Construction Activities permitting process. Implement effective controls per a site-specific SWPPP. The NPDES permit would require stormwater runoff and erosion management using BMPs, such as earth berms, vegetative buffers and filter strips, and spill prevention and management techniques. The construction contractor would implement the sedimentation and erosion control measures specified in the NPDES permit and the SWPPP to protect surface water quality.

	Complete a Farmland Conversion Impact Rating Form (Form AD-1006) in conjunction with United States Department of Agriculture – Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) for the selected site.
Hydrology and Water Quality	Control soil erosion and sedimentation impacts during construction by complying with the NPDES permit and the SWPPP.
	Maintain undeveloped buffer areas along Chickamauga Lake (Site 1) and McWilliams Creek and its tributaries (Site 2).
	Design improvements in accordance with the requirements of Energy Independence and Security Act Section 438 with respect to stormwater runoff quantity and characteristics.
	Ensure the cemetery design includes sufficient on-site stormwater management so as not to adversely affect the water quantity/quality in receiving waters and/or offsite areas.
	Use native, low-moisture tolerant species to the extent practicable to reduce the need for irrigation.
Wildlife and Habitat	Conduct tree clearing/removal between November 1 and through March 31, outside the Indiana bat and northern-long eared bat roosting season. If tree clearing/removal activities cannot be conducted outside of bat roosting season, consult with the USFWS to develop and implement appropriate measures to minimize potential impacts to protected bat species.
	Maintain the natural wooded area along McWilliams Creek at the eastern boundary of Site 2 to prevent potential impacts to large-flowered skullcap, which has potential to occur in this area.
	Site 1 provides potential nesting habitat for bald eagles and herons. Prior to construction, a qualified biologist would survey the site. If active eagle or heron nests are identified, VA would coordinate with Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency and USFWS to determine and implement appropriate conservation measures.
	Conduct vegetation clearing associated with the cemetery development outside of the migratory bird nesting season (mid-April through July 1st). If vegetation-clearing cannot be conducted outside of the nesting season, a qualified biologist would survey the site for active nests prior to clearing. Active nests would not be disturbed until the young birds have fledged.
	Use native species, to the extent practicable, when re-vegetating land disturbed by construction to avoid the potential introduction of non-native or invasive species.

Noise	Limit, to the extent possible, construction and associated heavy truck traffic to occur between 7:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. on Monday through Friday, or during normal, weekday, work hours.
	Locate stationary operating equipment as far away from sensitive receptors as possible.
	Shut down noise-generating heavy equipment when it is not needed.
	Maintain equipment per manufacturer's recommendations to minimize noise generation.
	Encourage construction personnel to operate equipment in the quietest manner practicable (such as speed restrictions, retarder brake restrictions, and engine speed restrictions).
Land Use	Comply, to the extent practicable, with the development standards of Meigs County during cemetery design (Site 1). Unincorporated Sequatchie County does not have development regulations (Site 2).
Wetlands, Floodplains, and Coastal Zone Management	Design cemetery improvements to avoid wetlands and surface waters to the extent possible.
	Maintain green space buffers between the delineated wetlands and the cemetery development areas. Ensure all buffers are staked and protected to prevent disturbance during construction.
	If cemetery design requires construction within a wetland or stream area, submit requests for jurisdictional determination to the USACE and TDEC DWR, obtain all necessary permits and approvals from the agencies, and implement any required mitigation.
	Design cemetery improvements to be above 697 feet above mean sea level at Site 1, the elevation to which Chickamauga Lake can temporarily flood. Coordinated with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) for any development near the Chickamauga Lake shoreline (Site 1).
	Design improvements in accordance with the requirements of Energy Independence Security Act Section 438 with respect to stormwater runoff quantity so as not to adversely affect the flood elevations or water quantity/quality in downstream receiving waters.
Socioeconomics	Secure construction areas to prevent unauthorized access by children from nearby residential areas.
Community Services	None required.

Solid Waste and Hazardous Materials	Complete an asbestos survey of the current site buildings by a Tennessee-licensed inspector (Site 2). Remove asbestos containing materials that are identified in accordance with the National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants and State of Tennessee requirements prior to building demolition.
	Comply with applicable federal and state laws governing the use, generation, storage, transportation, and disposal of solid waste and hazardous materials.
Transportation and Parking	Coordinate with the Tennessee Department of Transportation, Meigs County, and/or Sequatchie County, as applicable, during the cemetery design to determine cemetery entrance location(s) and identify and implement any necessary roadway improvements.
	Ensure cemetery construction activities do not adversely affect traffic flow on local roadways; construction would be timed to avoid peak travel hours.
	Ensure debris and/or soil is not deposited on local roadways during the construction activities.
Utilities	Contact the local utility providers to determine the connection/extension requirements and implement the necessary requirements. Determine if the municipal water system has sufficient capacity for cemetery irrigation.
	Design, install, and operate on-site septic systems in accordance with TDEC DWR guidelines, to the extent practicable.
	Decommission the existing residential water well and septic system (Site 2).
	Plant low moisture tolerant species suited to Tennessee to minimize irrigation needs.
Environmental Justice	None required.