FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
PROPOSED CONSTRUCTION AND OPERATION OF PHASE V OF THE HOUSTON NATIONAL CEMETERY
HOUSTON, HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) prepared a Site-specific Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the potential environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic effects impacts that may result from proposed construction and operation of Phase V of the Houston National Cemetery (HNC) in Houston, Harris County, Texas. The SEA was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 ([NEPA]; 42 United States Code [USC] 4321 et seq.), the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Parts 1500-1508), and VA's NEPA implementing regulations, 38 CFR Part 26 (Environmental Effects of the Department of Veterans Affairs Actions).

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to construct and operate Phase V of HNC to continue to serve the burial needs of Veterans in the south Texas region. The Proposed Action is needed to meet Veteran burial needs through 2030.

Background

The Houston National Cemetery (HNC) in Houston, Texas, was dedicated in December 1965 and provides burial services for veterans in the greater Houston area and south Texas. The 75-foot carillon tower known as the Hemicycle, which serves as the central focal point of the cemetery, was dedicated on May 30, 1970. Since the completion of the Hemicycle, the cemetery has been expanded three times (Phase II, Phase III and Phase IV). Phase II included expansion of the site to the east that retained the original radial planning concept. Phase III, completed in 2009, retained the basic radial concept by further expanding the cemetery to the east. Phase IV, which was completed immediately adjacent to the Phase III expansion, provided additional capacity for burial service and allowed the VA to meet the needs of eligible veterans and their dependents for an estimated period of ten years and was anticipated in the cemetery’s original Master Plan.

The HNC is located on 417.5 acres of land owned by the State of Texas and the VA, of which approximately 213 acres are currently developed as part of the cemetery. The remaining land is improved pastureland reserved for future cemetery expansion and currently utilized for cattle grazing. Phase V would encompass approximately 42 acres of the remaining 206 undeveloped acres within the HNC property. Subsequent expansions would eventually encompass the entire 417.5 acres.

The proposed development of Phase V of the National Cemetery would continue to increase access to burial options to the currently unserved Veteran population living in south Texas; in 2018 the U.S. Census Bureau estimated over approximately 317,000 Veterans live within the 10

counties that comprise the south Texas region. Additionally, no other National Cemeteries are within 200 miles of Houston, Texas. Accordingly, the Proposed Action would continue to balance the currently unequal geographic distribution of National Cemeteries in the region.

1. Description of Proposed Action and Alternatives

Proposed Action

The proposed expansion would develop approximately 42 acres of HNC property east of the existing cemetery to provide additional burial space and services in a manner consistent with the cemetery's Master Plan. Upgrades and new construction to improve infrastructure, utilities, and existing facilities within the cemetery would also be included in the Phase V expansion. The upgrades and construction within the existing portions of the cemetery include maintenance and upgrades to the chapel and hemicycle, improved parking and traffic flow through the cemetery, as depicted in Figure 2-1. The Phase V expansion would consist of burial sections including pre-placed crypts, columbaria niches, and a committal shelter and associated infrastructure. Drainage, landscaping, pathways, roadway extensions, parking, signage, and electrical service and other utilities are incorporated into the expansion design to provide an experience consistent with the existing portions of the cemetery. Specifically, the Phase V expansion will consist of:

- Burial site expansion of approximately 14,000 pre-placed crypt full casket gravesites, approximately 8,000 columbaria niches, and approximately 2,000 traditional in-ground cremains. The Proposed Project will also include a hybrid natural (Green) burial section located within the open naturalized field area to accommodate 300 total burial sites sized 5'x10' with the following types of green burial: no vault burial, no casket burial, biodegradable casket burial and cremation with no urn burial. This area shall be naturalized landscaping, non-irrigated, and non-mowed.
- Extension of Veterans Memorial Drive within the cemetery property to the expansion area. The Proposed Project would also provide a new limited use cemetery entrance and gate at Aldine Western Road;
- Landscaping improvements;
- Irrigation system improvements and expansion;
- Demolition of existing, non-contributing structures and remediation of pesticide-impacted soils at Building 3006, as well as potential abatement of asbestos-containing building materials and lead-based paint.

The VA will continue to prepare separate NEPA analyses for each subsequent phase in the final Master Plan design for the proposed Houston National Cemetery.

Alternatives Considered

In addition to the Proposed Action described above, VA evaluated a No Action Alternative as part of the SEA. Under the No Action Alternative, the Proposed Action would not be implemented. Veterans and their families residing in south Texas would continue to be underserved and be required to travel more than 200 miles to reach a National Cemetery. The availability of use within the National Cemeteries in the region would continue to be unequal, and VA would not be in compliance with the requirements of the Service Members Civil Relief Act.

While the No Action Alternative would not satisfy the purpose of or need for the Proposed Action, this alternative was retained to provide a comparative baseline against which to analyze the effects of the Proposed Action, as required under the CEQ Regulations (40 CFR Part 1502.14). The No Action Alternative reflects the status quo and served as a benchmark against which the effects of the Proposed Action were evaluated.

The SEA examined in-depth two alternatives, the Preferred Action Alternative and the No Action Alternative, defined as follows:

• **Preferred Action Alternative**: Implement the Proposed Action by constructing and operating Phase V of the Houston National Cemetery based on the CD-2 plans prepared by the VA.

• **No Action Alternative:** Do not implement the Proposed Action as identified, and continue the unequal distribution of National Cemeteries in the region, requiring at least 80,000 Veterans and their families in central east Florida to travel more than 75 miles to reach a National Cemetery. Additionally, VA would not be in compliance with the requirements of the Service Members Civil Relief Act. For these reasons, the No Action Alternative is not preferable.

2. Potential Environmental Effects

As documented in the SEA, VA concludes no significant adverse impacts, either individually or cumulatively, would result from implementing the Proposed Action. The Proposed Action would have no or negligible adverse impacts on geology, coastal zone management, cultural resources, land use, utilities, socioeconomics, community services, parking, and environmental justice. During construction and operation of the Proposed Action, less-than-significant minor adverse impacts would occur to aesthetics, air quality, topography and soils, water resources (surface water, wetlands, floodplains, groundwater), wildlife and habitat, noise, solid and hazardous wastes, and transportation. VA will implement the management, avoidance, and regulatory compliance measures to maintain these impacts at less-than-significant levels as described in the SEA and incorporated in this FONSI. The Proposed Action would have less-than-significant beneficial long-term impacts on aesthetics (expansion of a National Historic Place), land use, and socioeconomics (increased local employment and indirect long-term economic benefit).

The potential environmental effects associated with implementing the Proposed Action are summarized in the following sections. The Best Management Practices (BMPs) that reduce, eliminate, or avoid these potential effects, are provided in the SEA.

Aesthetics. Less than significant effects on aesthetics would occur during construction and operation of the Proposed Action. Construction activities including excavation, grading, and

vehicle travel on paved and unpaved surfaces could generate fugitive dust emissions that can lead to nuisance concerns, such as reduced visibility on nearby roadways. During construction, fugitive dust emissions would be controlled and limited by implementing the BMPs for dust control and construction operations. Additionally, soils exposed during construction would be reseeded or replanted once grading activities are completed.

Following construction and during operation of Phase V of the National Cemetery, there would be long-term, beneficial aesthetic effects. The Preferred Action Alternative would change the aesthetic quality of the Site by beautification from unmanaged lands to improved lands with parklike landscaping, and grounds under continuous maintenance.

Air Quality. Less than significant effects on air quality would occur during construction and operation of the Proposed Action, which are below *de minimis* threshold levels.

Cultural Resources. Based on consultation with the Texas State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), federally-recognized Native American Tribes, and the results of a Phase I Cultural Resources Survey, no adverse effects to archeological resources or historic structures eligible for or listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) would occur within the Proposed Action's Area of Potential Effect (APE). Any potential effects that may occur during construction would be reduced or avoided by implementing the identified BMP (e.g. halting work and contacting the SHPO and/or Native American Tribes if any artifacts are encountered).

Geology, Topography and Soils. Less than significant effects on topography and soils would occur during construction and operation of the Proposed Action, while no effect on geology would occur. During construction of the Proposed Action, less than significant short-term adverse effects to topography and soils are possible due to soil erosion and sedimentation impacts while the proposed improvements are constructed. Construction and grading activities would remove selected vegetative cover, disturb the soil surface, and compact the soil, leaving it susceptible to erosion by wind and surface runoff. However, these potential effects will be prevented through the utilization of construction related BMPs and maintaining the generally flat topography after grading. After the completion of construction activities, vegetative cover would be re-applied and designed to blend with the existing landscape, therefore no significant long-term adverse topography or soils effects would be anticipated.

Water Resources (Surface Waters and Wetlands; Floodplains; Groundwater; Coastal Zone Management). Less than significant effects on water resources would occur during construction and operation of the Proposed Action. A previous delineation of wetlands at the Site indicated there are no jurisdictional wetlands the Phase V area. During construction, identified BMPs such as preventing soil erosion and sedimentation using hay bales and silt fence will further minimize effects on surface water quality. Potential short-term effects on groundwater quality from releases of construction vehicle operating fluids would be minimized by maintaining spill kits. Groundwater quality would not be affected by normal operation of the cemetery. Modern burial practices using biodegradable embalming fluids and placement of internments above the seasonal high-water table will minimize any groundwater effects. Water quality effects from impervious area stormwater run-off will be minimized by capturing and storing stormwater in retention ponds designed to accommodate post-development stormwater volume; the retained stormwater will be repurposed for irrigation source water, further reducing the need to use groundwater for irrigation purposes.

Wildlife and Habitat. Less than significant effects on wildlife and habitat would occur during construction and operation of the Proposed Action. The vast majority of natural habitats would remain intact on the Site, with development proposed within previously disturbed lands. Developed areas will be replanted with native trees, shrubs and grass species to reduce long-term effects.

Noise. Less than significant effects from noise would occur during construction and operation of the Proposed Action. During construction, noise from construction vehicles and building construction would occur but be minimized by limiting construction schedules to weekdays between 7:00 AM and 10:00 PM. During operation, long term periodic noise effects would occur from rifle salutes during committal services, but these effects would be reduced and managed by limiting the number of salutes to 3-5 per committal service and holding services between 7:00 AM and 4:00 PM.

Land Use. No significant adverse land use effects would occur during construction and operation of the Proposed Action. Beneficial minor long-term land use effects may occur due to the preservation of open space within the region and developing the Site in consideration of local zoning requirements.

Socioeconomics. No significant adverse socioeconomic effects would occur during construction and operation of the Proposed Action. Beneficial minor short term and long-term effects may occur due to increased local employment and personal income during construction. Operating an expanded National Cemetery would have an indirect long term positive socioeconomic effect on the local area.

Community Services. No significant adverse effects on community services would occur during construction and operation of the Proposed Action. The Proposed Action would not measurably increase the demand on local police or fire services. Use of other public or community services as a result of the Proposed Action is not expected. As such, the Proposed Action is expected to have a negligible impact on local community services.

Solid and Hazardous Materials. Less than significant effects from solid and hazardous materials would occur during construction and operation of the Proposed Action. New potential waste streams include remediation of pesticide-impacted soils, as well as potential asbestos-containing building materials (ACM) and lead-based paint (LBP) in Building 3006. Materials normally associated with construction activities would be present; however potential effects would be reduced or avoided with implementation of identified BMPs, such as maintaining construction equipment in good working order and implementing a spill prevention and control plan for potential releases of vehicle operating fluids. During operation, any potentially hazardous materials present at the Site will be stored in locations designated for hazardous materials.

Transportation and Parking. Less than significant effects on transportation on Aldine-Western Road would occur during construction and operation of the Proposed Action; no effect would occur on parking.

Utilities. No significant effect on utilities is anticipated during construction and operation of the Proposed Action. Construction and operation of the proposed National Cemetery would increase on- site utility consumption for electricity, communications/data, and natural gas. The projected total

use of groundwater for the Phase V Expansion and future expansions is 102,757,649 gallons per year, which is below the 120,000,000 gallons per year permitted by the Harris-Galveston Subsidence District. These increases would remain within the capacity of local service providers therefore effects would be negligible.

Environmental Justice. No significant effect on environmental justice is anticipated during construction and operation of the Proposed Action. The proposed action does not disproportionately affect minority and or low-income populations located in the vicinity of the Site.

Cumulative Impact. Implementation of the Proposed Action is not expected to cumulatively significantly adversely affect any technical resource area discussed above. Cumulative net positive impacts to aesthetics, land use, and the local socioeconomic environment are anticipated from implementing the Proposed Action. The Proposed Action would not noticeably contribute to on-site and regional decline in natural resources and would maintain or enhance the local socioeconomic environment through indirect, beneficial impacts. Additionally, a separate NEPA analysis will be performed on future development phases to evaluate potential impacts to individual technical resource areas discussed above, and consider potential cumulative impacts associated with development at that time.

Potential for Generating Substantial Public Controversy. Construction and operation of the Proposed Action is consistent with surrounding existing land uses. No substantial public controversy regarding the Proposed Action has been received during the scoping or public comment period. Additionally, there are positive impacts relative to the aesthetics, land use, and local employment both during construction and operation of the Proposed Action.

3. Agency and Public Comment

The Draft SEA was made available for agency and public review for 30 days beginning May 28, 2020. A Notice of Availability was published in the local Houston Chronicle newspaper on May 28 and May 31, 2020, with information on how to obtain the documents and where to send comments. The Draft SEA was available for review at the Administration Building of the Houston National Cemetery, made available online for downloading from the VA website at https://www.cfm.va.gov/environmental/index.asp, and letters requesting review were sent to federal, state, and local agencies and groups.

As of the close of the public comment period, no member of the general public expressed opposition to the Proposed Action. The VA received comments or responses from the following agencies: the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Input provided by these agencies is addressed in the Final SEA.

4. Finding of No Significant Impact

As a result of the analysis of impacts in the SEA, summarized and incorporated by reference herein, it is the conclusion of the VA that, with the implementation of appropriate management and avoidance measures included herein, the Proposed Action would not generate significant public controversy nor have a significant adverse impact the quality of the natural or human environment within the meaning of Section 102(2c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Therefore, preparation of an environmental impact statement is not required.

For additional information, contact: Fernando Fernandez at Fernando.Fernandez@va.gov or at (202) 632-5529, or mail comments to Department of Veterans Affairs, 425 I (Eye) Street NW, Suite 6W317d, Washington, D.C., 20001.

Sincerely,

Elton, Sara J.

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Jeffrey K. Grimes
Executive Director, NCA

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