

Several different locations around the Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan area apparently are in the running as the Department of Veterans Affairs begins to shop for a site for a new national veterans cemetery here.

One group that has advocated for a location in Bellevue not far from Offutt Air Force Base may be willing to donate land for the cemetery, partly in hopes of improving the chance that its favored site will be chosen.

President Barack Obama earlier this year budgeted authorization and planning funds for a national cemetery to serve veterans in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa. If all goes according to plan, the new VA cemetery would be open to burials by 2013.

The VA last month began accepting proposals of land to be either sold or donated to the federal government for the cemetery. And though the deadline passed last week, VA officials now have extended it in hopes of getting more proposals.

"We're seeking to maximize the competition and provide a longer time for potential site owners to submit offers," said Jo Schuda, a spokeswoman for the VA in Washington. "We'd like to see more."

She declined to be more specific on how many proposals have been received so far beyond "several," and would not disclose locations of the proposals.

It's known that one submission came from a group based in Bellevue that has long advocated

for the cemetery and which has preferred a site northeast of 36th Street and Highway 370 in Bellevue.

Steve Johnson, president of the Memorial Ridge of the Midlands Foundation, declined to say what location was in the proposal the group submitted last week. The group also submitted an alternative site should its first choice not be acceptable, he said.

He said his group has always known the site selection process would be competitive, and that's one reason it's willing to raise money to buy the land outright and donate it to the VA. Doing so also might speed the process of opening the cemetery, he said.

U.S. Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., said he had no knowledge of what specific proposals were submitted, though he assumes the 36th Street and Highway 370 site was among them.

Terry said he supports the VA's plan to extend the deadline. He also said he thinks the Memorial Ridge group's push to donate land could be persuasive for the VA. The agency has a limited budget from which to make land purchases for as many as five new cemeteries across the nation this year.

"Price does matter," Terry said. "There's no doubt that would make it more attractive to the VA."

Terry said he's encouraged that the cemetery proposal seems to be moving forward so quickly, less than four months after Obama submitted his budget proposal.

The VA's request for land proposals sets several criteria: at least 200 acres; location in Douglas, Sarpy or Saunders County in Nebraska or Pottawattamie County in Iowa; within 25 miles of the Interstate 80-680 interchange; and easily accessible by highway.

Johnson said he thinks both locations his group submitted met all those criteria.

Regardless of what site the VA ultimately selects, Johnson said, the Memorial Ridge group will continue to be involved to promote the interests of local veterans. He said his group has received considerable interest since the VA first announced funding for the cemetery.

"Veterans appreciate that there will be a place here to honor their service and those they served with," he said.

Contact the writer:

444-1130, henry.cordes@owh.com

