

John Liebsack would just as soon not be the first veteran buried in a new national veteran's cemetery planned for the metro.

"I don't want that honor," the 66-year-old Vietnam-era veteran said.

But when his time does come, he said there's no question where he wants to be laid to rest.

Liebsack was among two dozen veterans Friday morning who gathered in Bellevue with U.S. Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., to celebrate this week's inclusion in President Barack Obama's 2011 federal budget of a national cemetery to serve veterans in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa.

Not only was there much agreement at the gathering that the new national shrine will be a great thing, there was also some agreement on the preferred place to locate it: a high ridge northeast of 36th Street and Highway 370 in Bellevue.

It would be up to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to make the ultimate decision, and the agency would likely consider multiple sites.

But the 100-plus-acre parcel, directly east of the Twin Creek Cinema complex, has long been coveted by the local group that's pushed for an Omaha-area federal burial ground.

The location sits directly in the flight path of the Offutt Air Force Base runway, would be easily accessible to veterans from throughout the region and would stand out when the grassy hill is covered with the stark white burial markers the federal government provides for veterans.

"When you look at that ridge, it's just spectacular," said Bellevue's John R. Thompson, a Navy veteran. "With the green and white, it will be a stunning view."

Thompson is one of the founders of the Memorial Ridge of the Midlands Foundation, the cemetery-advocacy group whose name was inspired by the coveted ridge. Thompson, a land developer who has developed Twin Creek, said VA officials also saw the possibilities when he previously showed them the site.

Lee Polikov, the Sarpy County attorney and a backer of the cemetery, said the cemetery also would help provide a buffer between Offutt and other development. Residential encroachment on air bases is a factor the federal government considers when it goes through rounds of base closure.

The ridge land currently is held by four different owners. The owner of the most critical 40 acres loves the cemetery idea, Thompson said, and has been holding the ground in anticipation it would be built.

But the VA will consider other locations, too, Thompson said, wanting to make sure it can acquire its cemetery land at competitive prices.

The cost of such cemeteries nationally varies widely because of land costs, but Terry said the final cost of the project probably would exceed \$10 million.

The Memorial Ridge group has grander plans for the site, hoping to raise private dollars to add military memorials of national significance, including one honoring those who served in the Cold War.

"We would like to see lasting memorials that will capture for future generations what the service of our veterans has meant," said Steve Johnson of Omaha, president of the advocacy group.

Based on typical timelines seen elsewhere, planning and building the cemetery would take three to five years.

Terry, who first pushed for the possibility of a cemetery back in 2002, said he was told the VA likely won't wait for the federal budget to pass to begin the planning process. The agency has a regular planning staff and budget.

Terry said VA officials told him they could begin yet this year to prepare the requests for proposals for proposed sites and preliminary design work.

For the record, both Terry and John Hilgert, director of the Nebraska Department of Veterans Affairs, would like to see a Bellevue site, particularly for its proximity to Offutt.

"Our veterans, no matter what branch they served in, would be proud to be buried in a cemetery near the base," Terry said.

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