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VA to study cemetery rules

BY TIM ELFRINK

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

The Department of Veterans Affairs will revisit its rules that now prevent eastern Nebraska from qualifying for a national cemetery, a VA official said Thursday.

But the region's best hope still lies in convincing Congress to approve and fund a new cemetery in Bellevue, said Richard Wannemacher, the VA's acting deputy undersecretary for memorial affairs.

Speaking to an Omaha luncheon of about 500 veterans and other cemetery supporters, Wannemacher said the VA this fall will complete a study of the criteria it uses in approving new national cemeteries.

The VA's rules state that at least 170,000 veterans must live within a 75-mile radius. With 133,000 veterans in the region, eastern Nebraska doesn't make the cut.

"The (VA) wants to honor and memorialize men and women near to their homes whenever possible," Wannemacher said. "We should have the study's results soon and we can see if, indeed, the 75-mile, 170,000 rule is the best way to serve our veterans."

Wannemacher said he's unsure what conclusions the study might reach.

Even if the VA decides to change its criteria and consider a community like Omaha, the process would take several years before a national cemetery could be built, he said. The quicker route is through Congress.

Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., introduced a bill last year to direct the VA to build a cemetery in Bellevue . Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., introduced a similar bill in the Senate this month.

"That kind of legislation has never passed before, but if it did we couldn't say no," Wannemacher said.

Steven Johnson, whose Memorial Ridge of the Midlands Foundation organized the luncheon, said local veterans are unfairly forced to travel long distances for cemetery options.

"We wanted the VA to know the depth of veteran support we have for a national cemetery in the region," Johnson said.

The only national cemetery in the state, Fort McPherson National Cemetery, is east of North Platte, some 280 miles from Omaha.

The 20-acre cemetery was established in 1873 for the remains of soldiers stationed at the nearby frontier Army post. The VA inherited Fort McPherson in the early 1970s, when it took over dozens of cemeteries from the Army, Wannemacher said.

"We probably wouldn't have built a cemetery in Maxwell, Nebraska, or these other remote areas today," he said.

Wannemacher encouraged veterans to continue discussing a state-run cemetery, but Johnson said he hasn't found support in Lincoln for such a plan.

The VA grants funds to build state-run cemeteries, but states must pay for land and maintenance. State law says Nebraska can't authorize a veterans cemetery unless enough private funds have been collected to create an endowment to pay for maintenance.

Veterans attending Thursday's luncheon said they were glad to hear more about Nelson's and Terry's bills and were encouraged that Omaha might one day have a national cemetery.

"Numbers-wise, the VA should be a little more flexible," said Rick Savage, 55, an Air Force veteran from Bellevue. "I think that we'll see progress, if we all keep talking to our congressmen and senators."

