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Nelson bill backs vets cemetery in Bellevue

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Sen. Ben Nelson has added his voice to those calling for locating a national veterans cemetery in Bellevue.

Nelson, D-Neb., introduced a bill in the Senate this week that would direct the Department of Veterans Affairs to establish a national cemetery to serve veterans from eastern Nebraska and western Iowa.

The VA has said that Bellevue does not have enough veterans living within a 75-mile radius to meet its guidelines for having a national cemetery. The VA requires at least 170,000 veterans in a region to qualify, and the department counts 133,000 in and around Bellevue.

But an independent survey by the Metropolitan Area Planning Agency in Omaha found 172,500 veterans within that 75-mile radius, Nelson said. Those veterans deserve a national cemetery in the region, he said.

"My bill will . . . ensure that the 172,000 veterans in this region will get the recognition they deserve and the honor of a final resting place in a national veterans cemetery," he said.

Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., introduced a similar bill in the House last year. The Omaha City Council passed a resolution in December supporting a new cemetery in Bellevue.

The Memorial Ridge of the Midlands Foundation, a local group backing the cemetery, has planned a town hall meeting with VA officials next week in Omaha to discuss the matter.

The meeting, scheduled for 11:30 a.m. on March 13 at the Holiday Inn convention center at 72nd and Grover Streets, will feature Richard Wannemacher, deputy undersecretary for memorial affairs, said Steven Johnson, the foundation's president.

Veterans who wish to attend must RSVP by Friday by calling 402-930-1737 or sending an e-mail to MemorialRidge@aol. com, Johnson said.