



JERRY PETROWSKI

WISCONSIN STATE SENATOR

Senate Bill 866

February 23, 2022

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for hearing testimony today on Senate Bill 866 - a bill that would authorize the construction of 2,500 additional columbarium units at the Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery. I appreciate your time and consideration of this important legislation.

The 2019-21 Wisconsin State Budget enumerated Phase Five of improvements at the cemetery for a total project cost of \$5.3 million, funded with 92% federal and 8% state dollars. The project scope included road improvements, crypt expansion, adding columbarium space, and constructing an Urn Garden. During design, however, it became evident the enumerated budget would not fund the full project scope. As a result, the design team opted to remove the columbarium – which is a structure for the respectful display and interment of funerary urns holding cremated remains – from the project.

Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) staff recently began preparing for the 6th phase of this improvement project. In addition to the columbarium, the Phase 6 scope also includes several other improvements to the grounds, including the repair of parking areas for our veterans' families and construction of an additional committal shelter, which provides cover for those interring their loved ones at the cemetery during inclement weather. However, for the purposes of this legislation, the department has decided to focus solely on the monies associated with construction of the additional columbarium units because the need for them to be approved is immediate.

In order to proceed with the project and meet federal funding deadlines, the project will need to be enumerated outside the traditional budget process. Therefore, this legislation will enumerate the project and authorize \$5,000,000 total (\$4,560,000 FED/\$440,000 PR) in order to construct the much-needed columbarium units. If the enumeration is adopted, planning on the project will continue with the goal of starting construction in January 2023. Based on this timeline the project will be complete in January 2024 and be sufficient to meet demand for the next five years.

I cannot think of a better way to help honor our veterans – our heroes – who sacrificed so much for their country during their lives. Giving them a final resting place amongst their fellow veterans is a small but powerful way of expressing our thanks to them and their families. Again, thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions.

29TH SENATE DISTRICT

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**Senate Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs
and Constitution and Federalism
February 23, 2022
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Chairman Wimberger and members, thank you for the opportunity to speak in favor of Senate Bill 866. My name is Donald Placidi. I am the administrator of the Division of Veterans Benefits, which includes the Veterans Cemeteries, at the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs. We thank Senator Petrowski and Representative Swearingen for introducing this important legislation.

Wisconsin is home to three Wisconsin state veterans memorial cemeteries. Although these are operated by the Wisconsin DVA, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which provides significant levels of funding, establishes environmental and operational standards as a matter of receiving funding, in order to ensure veterans cemeteries across the nation present a uniform level of service that reflects the solemnity of these final resting places of America's heroes, regardless of where a cemetery is located.

The burial options at all Wisconsin veterans cemeteries include pre-set crypts for casket burials, columbarium for above ground burial of cremated remains, urn gardens for in ground burial of cremated remains and a scattering garden for cremated remains.

The Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery is located in Union Grove, adjacent to the Wisconsin Veterans Home and the Southern Wisconsin Center. This cemetery is currently the fourth busiest state veterans cemetery in the United States and territories. Approximately 60% of the cemetery's 105 acres have been developed in past development phases.

The Southern Cemetery phase VI expansion authorized by SB 866 will enable the cemetery to accommodate an increasing need by adding 2500 columbarium niche units, which will extend the availability of columbarium placements for an estimated five years following completed development under current eligibility guidelines. Without the expansion authorized by SB 866, we estimate the cemetery could exhaust available columbarium space by August of next year.

The volume of interments at Southern Cemetery generally exceeds 1350 annually. Cremated burials account for 71% of all burials this fiscal year, while columbarium burials account for 48% of all burials.

SB 866 enumerates the project that will enable the state to obtain the 100% federal funding from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for the construction project. State enumeration now is the key that unlocks the federal funding to undertake construction this federal fiscal year. USDVA funding requires the project go to bid by July 1.

Thank you, again, for this hearing and the scheduled vote. I'm happy to address questions you may have. Thank you.