

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

Master Plan St. Albans Columbarium National Cemetery Administration St. Albans, Queens County, New York

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) completed a Supplemental Environmental Assessment (Supplemental EA) to analyze and evaluate the potential effects of the design, construction and operation of a columbarium located on 5.25 acres of land located on the St. Albans Community Living Center, St. Albans, and Queens County, New York (Proposed Action). The Supplemental EA was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA; 42 United States Code [U.S.C] 4321 et seq.), the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Parts 1500 - 1508), 38 CFR Part 26 (Environmental Effects of the Department of Veterans Affairs Actions), and the Veterans Association (VA) NEPA Interim Guidance for Projects (VA 2010). The Supplemental EA is attached to this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and is incorporated in its entirety by reference.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to provide a National Veterans Burial Ground of sufficient size and capacity to serve the projected needs of Veterans and their families in New York City. The Proposed Action would provide burial facilities for eligible veterans in New York currently not served by a National Cemetery or State Veterans Cemetery. The new cemetery would provide additional capacity, as well as improved access to Veterans and their families (i.e., reduced travel time to a National Cemetery), and would help balance the current unequal geographic distribution of National Cemeteries in this region. There are currently no open National Cemeteries located within New York City, New York.

The Proposed Action is needed to meet the NCA's goal of increasing burial options in areas with an unserved veteran population in the New York City area, as specified by Congress, in response to the Evaluation of the VA Burial Benefits Program (August 2008) of at least 80,000, in accordance with the Service Members Civil Relief Act, also known as the Veteran's Benefit Act of 2010. It also meets the goal of the NCA's Urban Initiative. The proposed facility will accommodate cremated remains in columbaria and will be a satellite facility to the Long Island National Cemetery on Long Island. Over several phases of expansion within the current 5.25 acres, the site will be developed to accommodate up to 35,920 niches over a 100-year period.

ALTERNATIVES

Preferred Alternative. The Proposed Action would construct a columbarium within the 5.25 acres to consist of an eventual total of approximately 35,920 niches, an administration/public information center building with accessible restrooms, and locator

kiosk, an open-air committal shelter, access roads and walkways, an ossuary, a storm water management system, utility lines and site security measures. Vegetation, including trees, lawn areas and an open meadow along the west and north side of the site are proposed to be implemented.

Phase I of the plan will consist of the construction of maximum of 3,760 niches, depending on availability of funds; utility infrastructure; paved pedestrian and vehicular pathways; administration building; committal shelter; and perimeter fencing. Areas for future development will be initially planted with manicured lawn and natural meadow grass along the west and north portion of the site. The perimeters of the natural meadows will be framed by cut lawn. Phase 1 columbaria will be positioned on the south east quadrant of the facility near the administration building/public information center, main concourse and committal shelter. It is anticipated there will be approximately 400 inurnments per year leading to full capacity in approximately 100 years. Future phases would result in the construction of 3,000-6,000 niches in subsequent years until full build-out

The small size and large expansion potential of this site require efficient, balanced design. The St. Albans VA Hospital is a fenced secure area and VA National Cemeteries are always open to the public. Due to the security concerns, the conditions of the land transfer from the St. Albans Veterans Hospital do not allow for public access/egress to/from the retained VA Hospital property. This constrains the access design to the site boundaries.

The current and future design of the small-sized site must maximize the space for Columbarium niches, not expansive drives and parking. National cemeteries are also public monuments that contain aesthetic and contemplative elements. Internal traffic should not interfere with the aesthetic elements of the contemplative design/landscaping of the front entrance by crossing in front of it on-site. This necessitates few, secluded and narrow roadway footprints making only one-way traffic feasible.

No Action Alternative. Under the No Action Alternative, the Proposed Action would not be implemented. Based on NCA projections, veterans and their families residing New York City are underserved and will continue to be so without adequate burial capacity at St. Albans. Veterans and their families would need to travel further to the closest available national cemetery, or to a private cemetery for burials. The distribution of national cemeteries in the region would continue to be unequal, and the VA would not be in compliance with the requirements of the Service Members Civil Relief Act. Furthermore; the No Action Alternative would create hardships for the survivors of deceased veterans for attending the funerals and for grave visitations, because of the distances between homes and the burial sites. If veterans and their families must resort to private burials, they are deprived of the honor and privilege bestowed upon them by a grateful nation for their service to their country.

Although the No Action Alternative does not meet the purpose of and need of the project, this alternative was retained, because it reflects the status quo and serves as a

benchmark against which the effects of the Proposed Action can be evaluated, as required under the CEQ Regulations (40 CFR Part 1502.14).

Summary of Potential Environmental Impacts Associated with the Proposed Action

- **Aesthetics:** There will be minor, short-term adverse temporary impacts to the visual quality of the site for St Albans Campus and the surrounding Baisley Boulevard and Addisleigh Park neighborhoods during construction. Each completed phase as well as the final facility will result in a long-term benefit with formal designed and maintained landscape with trees and vegetation providing screening from the public sides along Baisley Boulevard and the Roy Wilkins Park. Areas not built as part of the first phase of construction will be managed as meadows framed with lawn.
- **Air Quality:** Estimated construction and operational emissions are well below de minimis for criteria pollutants. A Record of Non-Applicability (RONA) of Clean Air Act General Compliance Conformance was prepared. Fugitive dust emissions will be controlled primarily by limiting the area of ground disturbance and will be mitigated by spraying water to dampen surfaces of dry work areas as needed.
- **Community Services:** There will be no impacts or disruption of community services as part of the construction and operation of this facility.
- **Cultural Resources:** There will be no adverse effect to the St. Albans facility historic property with the construction of the columbarium. No archaeological remains of the temporary buildings that once were built in this area or remains of any historic or prehistoric activities in this area were identified by an archaeological survey. There will be no archaeological properties affected by the construction, operation and maintenance of the columbarium.
- **Environmental Justice:** This plan will not contribute any environmentally deleterious effects to the community.
- **Floodplains, Wetlands and Coastal Zone Management:** The study area is outside the New York State Coastal Zone. There are no wetlands or floodplains within the site or adjacent to the site that would be affected by the proposed action.
- **Geology and Soils:** Minor, short-term adverse erosion and sedimentation impacts are anticipated with the implementation of the Preferred Alternative. Implementation of storm water management BMPs will substantially reduce erosion and sedimentation impacts to minimal or none. Although soils will be permanently as well as temporarily impacted by the construction of the Preferred Alternative, this would not affect the subsurface geology of the site. The construction of a permanent storm water management system for the operation

and maintenance of the Preferred Alternative will result in no effect to these systems. The operation of the facility should have no impact on these resources.

- **Hydrology and Water Quality:** There is no surface water present in the area of the Preferred Alternative. There will be no impact to this resource. Construction and operation of the facility will not impact adjacent surface water. The Preferred Alternative construction and operation would result in no impacts to groundwater.
- **Land Use:** The current land use for the area is primarily residential (R3-2) with public facilities and institutions. The use of this site as a cemetery is an open use of this zoning district. There would be no adverse effect on land use. This plan does not conflict with zoning use. The site is being constructed and operated on Federal property by a Federal Agency; NYC zoning and land use process are non-applicable. NYC permits for temporary/permanent construction activities that impact city property or roadways would be obtained by the construction contractor.
- **Noise:** Short-term, minor adverse impacts from general construction noise would potentially occur due to construction vehicles' entering and exiting the columbarium, as well as land preparation, grading, and other construction work. As part of the operation of the columbarium, there would be intermittent, short-term, minor adverse impacts resulting from any ceremonies held at the site. The landscape design will baffle the cemetery from the surrounding noise. The construction and maintenance equipment will use properly maintained and muffled vehicles and equipment. Heavy equipment and other noise emitters will be shut down when not in use. Existing traffic noise will not be increase by cemetery operations.
- **Socioeconomics:** This alternative will have a positive effect on the socioeconomic environment. Construction of the cemetery may temporarily support jobs, a minor economic benefit. The project will replace derelict, blighted buildings, with a perpetual, aesthetic and landscaped site.
- **Solid and Hazardous Materials:** There are no known contaminated sites or sources of contamination within the area of the Preferred Alternative. During construction or operation activities, fuel associated with equipment would be the only likely source of contaminants. There also may be asbestos containing material (ACM) associated with the steam tunnels that will be removed. BMPs, including cleaning and disposing of any spills or ACM in accordance with local, state and federal requirements would ensure there would be no adverse effects. Any abatement of ACM, if identified, will be accomplished in accordance with the US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) Occupation Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and other applicable federal regulations. Any material generated, if identified, will be disposed at a facility able to handle this material.

- **Transportation, Traffic and Parking:** Short-term, minor adverse impacts may occur from general the movement of workers, equipment and supplies on and off the site during construction. Worker/funeral/visitor parking would be on site to avoid interference with street parking as well as normal/festival uses of the adjacent Roy Wilkins Park facilities. There will be on-site parking and short-term cortege parking within the facility, and it is anticipated that this will accommodate most of the ceremonies and visitation to the site. The parking would be used only for cemetery business, funerals and visitors. A traffic study of the access plan and cemetery operations was conducted in 2018 to inform the design plan. Following additional public input, NCA refined this study in March 2020 and incorporated its findings into its Supplemental EA. The revised study showed that construction/operations of the facility will not have significant adverse impacts on traffic safety, speed or volume on Baisley Boulevard (Appendix E).
- **Threatened and Endangered Species:** The US Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS) indicate that there are no threatened or endangered species within the St. Albans campus, to include the area of the Preferred Alternative. There will be no effect from the construction and operation of the Preferred Alternative to these resources.
- **Utilities:** Existing utilities will be used, and some will be realigned across the site. There will be non-substantive long-term effects as the operation of the columbarium will increase the neighborhood's use of water, electric and gas but no new utilities will be required to be constructed or brought into the neighborhood. Hook ups to the existing NYC infrastructure would require permits to be included in the construction contract and obtained by the contractor. All the electrical, plumbing and mechanical equipment will be high efficiency to reduce waste.
- **Vegetation, Wildlife, and Habitat:** Construction of the Preferred Alternative would have short-term to long-term, minor adverse impacts from the permanent and temporary loss of habitats. The operation and maintenance of the Preferred Alternative will have no impact to these resources.
- **Cumulative Impacts:** Construction and operation of the Preferred Alternative will not increase or compound effects of recent and ongoing infrastructure and development projects.

AGENCY AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

NCA began its NEPA process for the Proposed Action in July 2019. NCA involved regulatory agencies and the public in its decision-making process. NCA published a Notice of Availability in the *Caribbean Life* weekly newspaper for a draft EA on July 2019. NCA also provided information on accessing the draft EA and the process for providing comments directly to stakeholders as identified in Appendix G. The 30-day public review period began on July 9, 2019 and ended on August 24, 2019. The draft EA and its appendices were also posted to the US Army Corps of Engineers project

website ([http://www.nan.usace.army.mil/Missions/Environmental/Environmental - Remediation/St-Albans/](http://www.nan.usace.army.mil/Missions/Environmental/Environmental_Remediation/St-Albans/)). Copies of the draft EA were available for review at the Queens Library of St. Albans and the Veterans Affairs, St. Albans Healthcare Campus. No comments were received from the public and several agencies sent no comment letters.

On November 11, 2019, NCA issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for its EA. Following the conclusion of its NEPA process, public comments regarding the Proposed Action were received by NCA via letter and e-mail beginning in December 2019, and verbally at a public meeting of Community Board 12 (CB 12) in February 2020. This board is relevant to this community growth. As a result, NCA determined that it was in the public's and agency's interest to reevaluate the EA and FONSI in light of the newly identified concerns regarding traffic and access. NCA updated its traffic study in the EA to evaluate [insert the purpose of the revised traffic study]. The updated study showed that construction/operations of the Proposed Action will not have significant adverse impacts on traffic safety, speed or volume on Baisley Boulevard.

While not legally required under NEPA, NCA chose to supplement its EA with the updated traffic study in the interest of full transparency. NCA offered a draft Supplemental EA for a 30-day public review between May 22, 2020 and Jun 21, 2020. A Notice of Availability was published in the *Caribbean Life* weekly newspaper and contained information on accessing the draft Supplemental EA and the process for providing comments. This information was also provided to previously identified government, agency and individual stakeholders. The draft Supplemental EA and its appendices were posted to the US Army Corps of Engineers project website ([http://www.nan.usace.army.mil/Missions/Environmental/Environmental - Remediation/St-Albans/May 2020 FONSI/](http://www.nan.usace.army.mil/Missions/Environmental/Environmental_Remediation/St-Albans/May_2020_FONSI/)).

CONCLUSIONS

As a result of the analysis and re-analysis of impacts in the EA and the Supplemental EA, which are incorporated in their entirety, it is the conclusion of VA that, with the implementation of appropriate BMPs and avoidance measures included in Section 3 of the Final Supplemental EA, the Proposed Action would not generate significant public controversy nor have a significant adverse impact the quality of the natural or human environment within the meaning of Section 102(2c) of the NEPA. Therefore, preparation of an EIS is not required. This FONSI rescinds and replaces in its entirety the previous FONSI issued on November 11, 2019.

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Date