

FINAL REPORT
STATE VETERANS CEMETERY, AUGUSTA
By Bob Young and Don Clark
September 2024

Five years ago this Commission summoned us to these chambers to give us an assignment. That task was to acquire a state veterans cemetery for Augusta. We immediately picked up the torch and ran with it. Not even COVID could slow us down.

The Georgia Board of Veterans Services joined us in approaching the Veterans Administration for a construction grant for a cemetery on the Gracewood property in South Augusta.

We met with the governor and worked with the State Properties Commission to reserve more than 200 acres for this project. As part of those discussions, the City agreed to construct an access road off Tobacco Road and to assist with demotion, totaling nearly 2.5 million dollars.

The Georgia Legislature included in its annual budget one million dollars as a down payment on a Veterans Administration grant. Working closely with the offices of Senators Ossoff and Warnock and Congressman Allen we aggressively pursued federal funds in the amount of ten million dollars.

While Georgia's application for a cemetery in Augusta was warmly received, it faced strong headwinds at the VA. The obstacle that was impossible to overcome was the requirement that cemeteries funded in the grant program be more than 75 miles from an existing cemetery. Unfortunately, Augusta is too close of cemeteries in Milledgeville, Georgia and Ft. Jackson, South Carolina.

Don and I pressed our Congressmen to include the cemetery as an earmark, a form of stand alone funding. However, there is no budget line to which to tie a veterans cemetery outside of the VA grant program.

Having been rebuffed by the VA, we turned our attention to the Georgia Capitol. The governor's staff urged us to work with the Legislature to let the funding originate there. We took two busloads of local veterans to lobby lawmakers on behalf of the cemetery. And, working through our local delegation, presented testimony to House and Senate Committees.

However, no appropriation passed through either chamber. The unofficial feedback we received was that if the state paid for a cemetery in Augusta, then it would set a precedent for other communities wanting a veterans cemetery.

The time consumed by all of this work over the last five years has resulted in the estimated cost of the cemetery rising from ten million dollars to twelve million dollars. And, if work were not to begin for another year or two, the estimate will rise to thirteen million dollars.

Our half a decade of work brings us back to the Augusta Commission with two questions you must answer:

- 1) As a matter of public policy, do you want a state veterans cemetery in Augusta?
- 2) If so, are you willing to pay for construction?

As your advocates for this project, we ask you to answer the first question in the affirmative.

As to the second point, we urge you to consider the cemetery as an infrastructure item in your next round of SPLOST, and to include thirteen million dollars to fund it.

Allow me to explain why this would be a good investment for Augusta.

Augusta is no stranger to partnerships with the state. Recently, you used the URA to build a fourteen-million-dollar parking deck for the Board of Regents.

For your investment in the veterans cemetery, the Georgia Department of Veterans Services will construct the cemetery on the state property that is reserved at Gracewood. The cemetery will be owned and operated in perpetuity of GDVS.

The cemetery will be a revenue generator for the City. The cemetery will provide local jobs and procurement opportunities, as well as be a draw for visitors.

Unlike other SPLOST projects like roads, bridges, parks, etc, the City will have no liability – financial, maintenance or otherwise – to support the cemetery. It will function as a state entity on state property, just like Augusta University.

Additionally, the Veterans Administration has assured GDVS that it would treat this locally funded cemetery the same as one built under the grant program, allowing GDVS to receive reimbursements for interments and grants for expansion.

So, this is where we are, five years to the month after being given this assignment. Believe me, we've looked under every rock for funding. We've come full circle.

Don and I thank you for this opportunity to have served you and the veterans in the CSRA.