

Monterey County vets get support commemorate fallen brethren



By Karen Y. Evans

In getting a memorial built commemorating the 69 men from Monterey County who were killed in Vietnam, the Monterey County Vietnam Veterans Memorial Committee has received public and political support from a variety of different directions.

"We have not run into anything negative at all at this point, and people even seem to be eager in supporting us to get our dream fulfilled," said committee member David Keith, a disabled veteran who did three tours in Vietnam.

The Pacific Grove Rotary Club and the 100-member Vietnam Veterans of Monterey County--who helped finance the start-up costs associated with the project--each donated \$1,000.

Commitments of support have also come in from Representative Leon Panetta, State Sen. Henry Mello, Assemblymen Eric Seastrand and Rusty Areias and the Monterey County Board of Supervisors.

"We also have had the full support of the sheriff and police departments, Salinas Mayor Russell M. Jeffries and the Salinas City Council. All city and county personnel have been helpful," said Keith.

More than any other group's support, though, the committee needs the monetary help of large corporations. The committee has submitted proposals to several companies--including Coors, Wells Fargo Bank, Tanimura & Antle, Bud of California and Anheiser Busch--hoping they will sponsor the project.

"No major corporations have

given us a (donation) yet," said Jess Armenta, president of the committee and a Vietnam Marine veteran.

We asked for money right after the October earthquake last year and they had already allocated their money to go towards earthquake relief. Budweiser, Coors and Wells Fargo Bank all turned us down, but we plan to resubmit our proposal again, said Bill Valdez, vice-president of the committee.

Most of the money received so far has come from individuals and small organizations. The single largest donation of \$1,500 came from the Salinas Valley Firefighters Association.

"We have gotten a lot of letters with checks of \$25 and \$50 from families who lost a son in Vietnam and are dedicating the money in his memory. I have a bunch of letters like that. It's really personal to them," said Armenta, who served in Vietnam at the same time three of his brothers did.

Keith, whose brother was killed in Vietnam, estimates that 50 percent of the men that will be honored on the memorial are Hispanic.

The memorial will stand on a hilltop off the East Laurel Drive extension--across the street from the Monterey County Public Works yard in Salinas--and will list the 69 men killed from Salinas, Seaside, Soledad, Pacific Grove, Monterey, King City, Greenfield, Castroville, Marina, Pebble Beach, Chualar, Carmel and Carmel Valley.

Since September 1989, when the committee was formed, \$10,000 has been raised for the final goal of \$100,000. Most of that money came from a barbecue fundraiser held May 27 which 800 people attended.

Estimating the project will be completed in 18 months to two years, the committee is already in the planning stages with three more fundraisers--a golf tournament,

wine tasting event and a rock and roll '60s concert--to take place in late summer.

The committee will also be holding a countywide contest to select a design for the memorial, but not until the fundraising is stable.

"We need to raise money first before we put together the applications (for the competition)," said Peter Kasavan, chairman of the site acquisition and design competition subcommittee.

The competition will require contestants, who do not necessarily have to be designers or architects, to submit designs for the memorial. The committee is only asking that four criteria be met--it must be visible and accessible, people must be able to touch it, and the 69 names must be on the memorial.

"People can send in a design that meets our criteria, and we will pick the best design. We want to involve the community in that sense," said Armenta.

The winners of the competition will receive a monetary reward, but the amount has not yet been announced.

Fundraising was not the major obstacle to overcome when the committee first began. Finding a site for the memorial took over six months.

After studying 12 previous sites, including the Salinas courthouse, the Salinas rodeo grounds, downtown Monterey, Toro Park and Laguna Seca, nothing fit the qualifications of the group until they saw the three acres of county-owned land on Laurel Drive.

"You can see all of Salinas at the top of the hill where the memorial will be," said Keith.

The committee then went to the Monterey County Board of Supervisors and asked for the land. The board did not have any specific plans for the property--since it is a landfill area--and constructing a building on the site was impossible.

After hearing the emotional testimony of the committee, the board agreed to support a plan to build a Vietnam veterans' memorial on county-owned land in Salinas. They could not ensure the land on Laurel Drive, though, until a soil study was taken to ensure a monument would be supported on the land during an earthquake.

"The county did do a soil test and we had a 90 percent compaction rate, so we are in pretty good shape. The hill can hold a memorial. That was our major concern and now it is no problem," said Armenta.

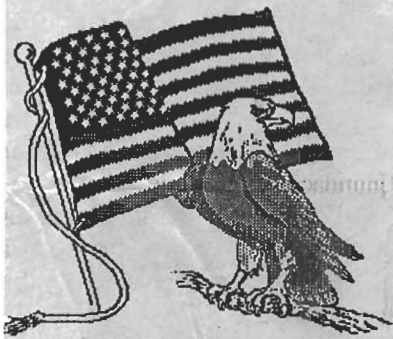
The lease and terms of agreement still have not been settled with the Board of Supervisors, but the committee sees no problem.

"Whether the land will be leased or donated has not been planned yet. We are looking at different alternatives right now," said Armenta.

The committee has also expressed interest in having the county maintain the facility after it is built.

"If we have to maintain it, it is more of a burden on us. Our committee was formed only to get the memorial built. After that, we will disband. If we have to maintain it ourselves, we will have to call in a third party, such as a veteran's organization, to take over the cost of maintaining the memorial," said Armenta.

The committee also envisions placing picnic tables, a ball park and parking facilities on the lower part of the hill, so visitors can spend the day.



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THURSDAY, MAY 6, 1999

LETTERS

Vietnam memorial needs attention

I just returned from a visit this morning to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in north Salinas.

Not only are the flags tattered but are also hung in the wrong order.

General maintenance is needed.

I hope that the people responsible for maintaining the site will at least hang new flags (in their proper order) and have the grass cut.

Peter Young
Castroville

Veterans park could use a hand

In regard to Peter Young's letter of May 6 about the condition of the site of the All Veteran's Park:

We get a lot of criticism but little help in developing the park and keeping it up.

If you are upset over how the site looks, how about offering time or money or inspiration to get individuals or businesses to contribute.

If the Monterey County Vietnam Veterans Memorial Committee had a dollar for each time it was criticized, it would be closer to seeing progress made on the project.

Come on, Salinas, we need help.

In Monterey County alone, we lost 76 brave young men in Vietnam who gave their lives in the defense of freedom.

The names listed on the flag at the memorial site deserve to be remembered for what they sacrificed. They also deserve a place for their families and friends to go to reflect on their loved ones who paid the ultimate price for your freedoms.

Cheri Keith
Salinas

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