



DATE: August 29, 2022

MEMO TO: Terry Wilke, Chair
Planning Committee

FROM: Alex Ty Kovach
Executive Director

REQUEST: Provide policy direction regarding a request from the US Department of Veterans Affairs for the conveyance of a 4.7-acre parcel adjacent to the Fort Sheridan National Cemetery, at Fort Sheridan Forest Preserve, for the expansion of the Cemetery.

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS SUPPORTED: Leadership; Organizational Sustainability

FINANCIAL DATA: There is no out-of-pocket cost for this project. When complete, the conveyance of the requested property could save the District in excess of \$30,000 a year in operational costs.

BACKGROUND: In 1998, as part of the US Department of Defense's Base Realignment and Closure process, the District received the first of three conveyances of land from the U.S. Army that together constitute the 249.7-acre Fort Sheridan Forest Preserve (the "Preserve"). The U.S. Army did not require the District to pay a purchase price for this land. However, a related Memorandum of Agreement between the Army and the District (the "MOA") requires the District to maintain in perpetuity the Fort Sheridan Cemetery, now the Fort Sheridan National Cemetery (the "Cemetery"), which is adjacent to the Preserve but is not owned by the District.

The Cemetery is a burial place for veterans of the United States Armed Forces. Though the US Department of Veterans Affairs (the "VA") manages the Cemetery and handles all aspects of burials, the District pays for contractual costs (such as mowing), capital costs (for repair and replacement of fencing and related site amenities), and operating supplies (fertilizer, topsoil, grass seed, headstone cleaning materials, etc.) In Fiscal Year 1997, the District deposited \$750,000 into the interest-bearing "Fort Sheridan Cemetery Fund" to pay for these costs. Since then, the available balance has declined to less than \$283,000. District labor costs are not charged to the Fund, and are estimated at approximately \$15,000-\$16,000 per year. Total District costs for 2022 are expected to exceed \$30,000.

In 2015, the VA first contacted the District to assess the District's interest in conveying approximately 20 acres of the Preserve adjacent to the Cemetery to the VA so that it can expand the Cemetery. In the course of ongoing discussions, the area being requested decreased to the current 4.7-acres being requested by the VA, which includes two separate parcels of the Preserve, one adjacent to the southwest side of the Cemetery and the other adjacent to the northeast side of the Cemetery (the "Subject Property"). The VA has stated that it intends to use the Subject Property to build and operate columbaria (i.e., above ground structures that house cremated remains) to serve as the final resting place for veterans. In exchange for the District's conveyance of the Subject Property, the VA would release the District from its obligation in the MOA to perpetually maintain the Cemetery, decreasing the District's operational costs.

Through a special web page, and an Open House held April 26, 2022, the District received public input and comments regarding the VA's request for the Subject Property. At the Committee of the Whole meeting on June 27, 2022, staff was directed to present a Policy Direction to the Planning Committee for review and comment prior to undertaking the negotiation of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the VA.

Staff is seeking Committee direction for staff to (i) continue discussions with the VA and (ii) negotiate an MOU or other agreement with the VA that would effectuate the conveyance of the Subject Property to the VA and the release of the District's maintenance obligations. That MOU or other agreement would be presented to the Planning Committee for review and recommendation at a later date.

REVIEW BY OTHERS: Chief Operations Officer, Director of Finance, Director of Planning and Land Preservation, Corporate Counsel.