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Testimony on Assembly Bill 887

Assembly Committee on Local Government

Good morning and thank you, Chairman Novak, Vice-Chairman Gundrum, and committee members for hearing Assembly Bill 887. AB 887 amends the 2021-23 Authorized State Building Program to add one project for the Department of Veterans Affairs. The project involves the construction of additional columbarium units at the Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery in the village of Union Grove. The project will be financed with \$440,000 in program revenue and \$4,560,000 in federal funds.

After adoption of the 2021-2023 budget, DVA was notified they were awarded federal funds for a 6th phase of improvements at the Southern WI Veteran's Memorial Cemetery. This phase of the project will add 2,500 columbarium units ensuring the cemetery can keep pace with demand projections. To proceed with the project, it will need to be enumerated outside the budget process.

As Vice-Chairman of the State Building Commission, I crafted AB 887 in tandem with the Department of Administration and with the full support of all members of the State Building Commission.

Upon adoption of AB 887, the State Building Commission will likely vote unanimously to pass the project at the Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery and help DVA continue to provide a final resting place for countless Wisconsin vets.

Thank you again for giving this bill your attention and consideration.



ROBERT WITTKE

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 62nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

TESTIMONY: ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT
FEBRUARY 2, 2022

Chairman Novak and Committee Members,

Thank you for holding a public hearing on **Assembly Bill 887 (AB 887)** relating to authorizing additional funds outside the 2021-23 Authorized State Building Program for the construction of columbarium units at the Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery (SWVMC).

Under 2019 Act 9, the project at SWVMC was approved to include road improvements, crypt expansion, additional columbarium space and construction of an Urn Garden. During the design process it became clear funding would be short if they were to complete the entire project. The addition of columbarium space was left out. Now at the request of the Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA), **AB 887** would amend the 2021-23 Authorized State Building Program to add this one project at a cost of \$5,000,000 project - \$4,560,000 Federal and \$440,000 from Program Revenue Cash.

Passage of Assembly Bill 887 would allow the Department of Veteran Affairs grant application to be on the priority list for funds through the Veterans Cemetery Grant program. This federal program has historically funded the State's cemetery projects. This is an important step to complete a much needed project at the Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery.

I appreciate the public hearing on **AB 887** and hope the committee will move swiftly to pass the bill out of committee.



**Assembly Committee on Local Government
February 2, 2022
Assembly Bill 887**

Chairman Novak and members, thank you for the opportunity to speak in favor of Assembly Bill 887. 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 Representative Swearingen and Senator Petrowski 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 887 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.

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. At the current use rate of the columbarium, the cemetery estimate exceeding columbarium niches within 2 years.

AB 887 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 by this June is the key that unlocks the federal funding to undertake construction this federal fiscal year.

Laura Larson of the Department of Administration is with us to respond to your questions. Thank you.