

## City, vets: No grave concerns over projected 2018 cemetery

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent  
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### \$7M cemetery to be built along Hasler Valley Road

There are no more grave concerns about Gallup getting a veterans cemetery, literally. These days, city officials and local veterans have their attention focused toward the future.

“You can say that the city will definitely be the home of a national veterans cemetery,” Mayor Jackie McKinney said in a telephone interview this week with the Gallup Sun. “Right now, the project has to go through its various phases. Construction is set to start in October 2017.”

McKinney said the cemetery is one of four slated to be built around New Mexico over the next several years. Gallup was supposed to be first on Gov. Susan Martinez’ list to receive funding for a cemetery, but when state and federal officials came out to Gallup to survey Hillcrest Cemetery, on Aztec Avenue near downtown, officials discovered, among other things, that the site was “too hilly and rocky,” McKinney said.

For that reason, a site along Hasler Valley Road and between I-40 was selected, McKinney added.

“The state and federal people came out and the first (proposed) site was not acceptable,” McKinney said. “That’s basically why the current site was chosen.”

McKinney, who is not a veteran, noted that the first proposed site was about five acres in composition, whereas the Hasler Valley site contains some 15.5 acres.

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“That’s a positive for the city,” he said of the extra acreage. He said the proper paperwork and documentation connected to the cemetery’s land area, which the city of Gallup owns, is in place, adding that if there’s anything else that must be done paperwork-wise, the city will follow through on it.

“I think it’s a very good thing that Gallup has a veterans cemetery on the way,” Dave Cuellar, a veteran of the US Army and member of the local group Veterans Helping Veterans, said. “This gives military families with loved ones buried in Santa Fe some needed relief.”

Gallup Public Works Director Stan Henderson, a US Navy veteran, gave the following timeline and cost of the Gallup national cemetery. Neither McKinney nor Henderson speculated on what the exact name of the cemetery would be.

### **Henderson noted:**

An architectural and engineering study should be complete by June.

Construction should start in October 2017.

A completion date is slated for the end of 2018.

The estimated cost would be between \$6 and \$7 million, with funds coming from the federal government and everything else, i.e. labor, construction, etc., from the state.

“These are anticipated dates,” Henderson said of the timeline. “That means these dates are contingent on working conditions regarding the weather and any unexpected project delays. But right now we’re looking at the end of 2018 as a completion date,” Henderson said.

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McKinney said the cemetery would be open to honorably discharged veterans from the five military branches of the United States. He said spouses would be eligible for burial plots, too. One need not to be from Gallup or McKinley County to be buried at the projected Gallup national cemetery.

The cemetery project was welcomed by Gallup City Councilor Fran Palochak, also a US Navy veteran, who reiterated the travel plus.

“This alleviates a lot of travel for people,” she said. “I am very happy that Gallup is getting this.”

Former McKinley County Commissioner David Dallago, a US Air Force veteran, welcomed the cemetery project, also.

“A lot of people have waited a long time for this and worked very hard to get this,” Dallago said. “This is a big plus for Gallup and McKinley County.”

There are currently two cemeteries in Gallup: One is Hillcrest and the other is Sunset in west Gallup.

Joe Zecca, a US Navy veteran and owner and operator of the American Bar, said Hillcrest contains a special plot designated for veterans. Zecca, 86, said the projected Hasler Valley Road cemetery is an excellent idea.

“Well, I can tell you that this is something that veterans in this area want,” Zecca said. “I can tell you that we are very thankful for it.”

Besides Gallup, other New Mexico cemeteries will be built in Angel Fire, Carlsbad and Fort Stanton. Gallup’s closest national cemetery is located in Santa Fe, which means people from

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Gallup who have loved ones buried there must travel more than two hours for visits.

McKinney said the cemetery would have a 50-year holding, or accommodation, capacity, which is standard with national cemeteries.

The *Albuquerque Journal* reported in April 2014 that New Mexico is home to 170,700 veterans, including 21,000 women veterans. The four communities selected represent areas of the state with the largest number of underserved veteran populations, the Journal reported. The other national cemetery in New Mexico is in Fort Bayard.

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