

## Build it quickly

As we observe Veterans Day today, we must ask federal bureaucrats to do a better job of cutting through red tape and build a national veterans cemetery near Bakersfield before 2008. That's the date set by National Cemetery officials who will oversee construction of the project.

"When we began this process, we didn't realize it would be quite so lengthy," said Andrew Wahrenbrock, a Vietnam veteran and early supporter of a national cemetery in Kern County. "It's sort of surprising it would take so long, particularly when Tejon Ranch would donate the land."

The Bakersfield area was designated last year as one of six sites in United States for a new cemetery by the National Cemetery Expansion Act. The cemetery will be funded with federal money.

**After that announcement, Tejon Ranch officials generously agreed to donate 500 acres for the cemetery. The land is located on a scenic site near the intersection of Highways 223 and 58 east of Bakersfield.**

**National Cemetery officials visited the site last year and deemed it as most suitable.**

**Tejon Ranch officials let cemetery planners pick which 500 acres they wanted out of a 2,000-acre area on either side of Highway 223, south of Highway 58. the area – with rolling, oak-studded hills – is perfect for a place of peace and rest, Tejon spokesman Barry Zoeller said.**

Astonishingly, last week Robert Holbrook, director of the Office of the National Cemetery Administration, said no final decision to accept the Tejon land has been made and it could be four more years before a cemetery could be completed.

"It looks very nice, but we don't want to curtail other offers if people have corporate land for sale or donation," Holbrook said.

**For sale? It is inconceivable that anyone could offer a better, more beautiful site than the Tejon land – and it is for free.**

Holbrook and his staff should be able to comprehend one of the criteria for selecting a site is that they would be doing taxpayers a service by accepting a beautiful site without spending any tax dollars for the purchase.

After a Bakersfield site is officially chosen, it will take nine to 12 months to complete an environmental impact report. The sooner a site is chosen, the sooner the study and construction can commence.

The quicker the cemetery is constructed the better. Of the 16 million Americans who served in uniform during World War II, only 6 million are still living – and most of them are now in their late 70s or 80s. Approximately 1,500 American veterans of all wars die each day, more than a half-million per year, according to estimates by the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

More than 300 veteran funerals are held in Bakersfield annually, according to Robert Otto, a veteran of World War II and the Korean War and longtime member of VFW Post 7216 in Bakersfield.

Bakersfield was chosen for the site of the new cemetery because of its concentration of veterans – about 200,000 within a 75-mile radius. Of California's six national veterans cemeteries, only two have space available for new casket burials.

The Bakersfield cemetery needs to be built quickly. Officials of the National Cemetery Administration owe it to veterans to speed up the process.