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## United States Senate

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June 5, 2006

The Honorable William F. Tuerk  
Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs  
U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Under Secretary Tuerk:

I am writing to follow up with you about an important issue we discussed when we met in my Senate office last month: the effort to bring a veterans' cemetery to the Pikes Peak region of Colorado. I sincerely appreciate your willingness to spend time with me about this and other issues important to veterans in my state, and to work with my staff to accommodate the veterans' community in central and southern Colorado.

In our meeting, we discussed the process by which the Department of Veterans' Affairs has identified sites across the country that are most in need of a national veterans' cemetery following the enactment of the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act of 1999, whereby the VA identified 31 new cemeteries it had to build over 20 years, twelve of which have either been completed or are in various stages of development. While I understand why the VA has placed a high priority on the sites identified through that process, including Detroit, Chicago, Miami, Pittsburgh, and several other locations with high population densities and large veterans' communities, I am concerned that VA's existing guidelines for identifying where to initiate the construction of new cemeteries do not take into account a number of factors that are critical to accurately assessing the need for such cemeteries.

As you explained in our recent meeting, VA's current guidelines take into account a potential site's distance from an existing national veterans' cemetery, as well as the number of veterans currently residing in the area. Specifically, the Department established a threshold of 170,000 veterans residing within a 75-mile radius for a potential site to be eligible for a national cemetery.

I understand the apparent rationale behind these specific guidelines: concentration of veterans within a small geographical area is a reasonable way to determine need, upon which decisions in this area should without question be based. Having said that, the guidelines fail to account for a number of other important factors. First, the existing threshold of 170,000 veterans VA established during its most recent evaluation takes into account only the current veterans' population, and does not reflect future need. As you know, Colorado Springs is home to a large active-duty military population. The United States Air Force Academy, Peterson Air Force Base, Schriever Air Force Base, NORAD, and Fort Carson are all located in the Springs, and more than 32,000 officers – and their families – reside in the immediate vicinity (it is estimated that, with the most recent round of base closures, 12,000-15,000 more troops may come to the area).

Combined with the 125,000 veterans currently living in south-central and southeastern Colorado (including more Congressional Medal of Honor recipients in one city – Pueblo, CO – than any other in America), and recognizing that this community is likely only to grow larger in coming years, these figures paint a different picture of the military and veterans' presence in the Pikes Peak region than does VA's most recent evaluation.

Second, the strict 75-mile threshold only reflects geographical distance, and does not consider the relative difficulty of actually *traveling* that distance. For instance, while Colorado Springs is within 75 miles of Denver (where the Fort Logan national veterans' cemetery is located) as the crow flies, due to traffic, it can take more than two hours to travel between the two cities. VA's guidelines should reflect such considerations.

Finally, VA's process for identifying new cemetery sites does not accurately reflect cultural realities in my state. As my fellow Coloradans well know, while Denver and Colorado Springs are relatively close in terms of geographical proximity, the community of Colorado Springs is the "center of gravity" for military and veterans affairs in the state, and it represents the people and communities of the southern and southeastern parts of Colorado, tying together counties from my home in the San Luis Valley to those in the Arkansas River Region and the Eastern Plains.

For all of these reasons, a national veterans' cemetery in Colorado Springs could serve these deserving people in a way – both physically and symbolically – that the existing cemetery at Fort Logan in Denver cannot.

I realize that, under the existing structure, significant obstacles remain to this critical effort. Despite their passion for their cause, the veterans and others seeking to bring a cemetery to Colorado Springs are aware of those obstacles and want to work with the VA to ensure the Department is prepared to meet their needs and the needs of veterans across the nation.

With that in mind, I urge you to do everything you can to ensure that VA's guidelines with respect to this matter accurately reflect each and every relevant factor. The veterans of the Pikes Peak region of Colorado – and across the country – deserve nothing less.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,  
  
Ken Salazar  
United States Senator