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Legacy project seeks to honor all veterans

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Chronicle staff

Fifteen basalt columns lie in the thick dust near the south entrance to Tonasket.

Five will represent the five branches of the U.S. armed forces; the rest will support walls covered in names of those who have served honorably in the military, say organizers of the U.S. Armed Forces Legacy Project.

The columns will wait until all the needed funding comes in to complete the project, a dream of a group of veterans and others from the Tonasket area, say organizers.

Tonasket owns the roughly half-acre of ground on which the project will be built; council decided to lease it to the group for 99 years at a rate of \$1 per year.

Anyone can be a member of the legacy team, but only veterans can be on the board of directors for the project, according to the group.

Board member Roger Castelda, a former first lieutenant in the Army, served as a platoon leader in Vietnam.

Originally, the team was tied in with the American Legion post in Tonasket, but then it decided to form a separate association, said Castelda, an attorney. It now is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

Shortly thereafter, the group hired a Spokane firm to design the legacy project, now in its final form.

The team is working toward necessary funding. Estimates for total project costs are between \$350,000 and \$400,000, Castelda said.

So far, the group has raised about \$30,000.

But there's been a lot of community support, Castelda said. For example, a high school senior's project, with help from AmeriCorps, will be to design and create a time line of major U.S. wars on the back of the legacy wall.

Others have donated time and supplies to work on the project, said Bill Schroedel, board member and Navy veteran.

Through various fund-raisers, the public has been generous, according to Schroedel. At the group's last auction, a lemon meringue pie sold for \$125.

Last week staff of Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., met at Whistler's with board members to help guide them in the grant-seeking process, Schroedel said.

The project itself is a variety of things. Schroedel said it's called a legacy project and not a memorial because not only the dead will be honored and remembered, but also those still alive and still in the service.

The only requirement, said board member and Air Force veteran George Frank, is that the person "just honorably served the nation" at any time in any military branch.

In the center of the land, volunteer workers plan to erect five of the basalt columns to represent the branches of the armed forces. In the center of the five, a U.S. flag will wave.

In the northwest corner, a small building will hold an informational library of veterans' resources. Staff will be available to assist veterans with their needs, Castelda said.

Arcing out from each side of the building, walls will run in four panels each. Names of veterans will be placed on the wall, with the U.S. war timeline on the back of the wall.

Main goal of the legacy project is to honor and assist veterans, Castelda said. The team hopes to have construction complete by Veterans Day 2008, he added.

All that depends on funding. Volunteers meet periodically on weekends to get projects done at the site, but they're waiting for money to come in to purchase more supplies.

So far, fund-raisers have gone over fairly well, and have included a yard sale, auctions and dinners, said those involved.

According to the team, people can purchase plaques for the legacy wall for \$100 each; the plaques can have four lines of information about any veteran. Schroedel said 65 have been sold so far.

Funds from legacy project caps, patches, T-shirts and coffee mugs also go toward site work.

Membership dues of \$20 per year fund the project as well. Businesses or individuals who want to be a sponsor can give varying amounts and receive recognition in the project as well, said organizers.

People also can give directly to the project by depositing money into the legacy project bank account at U.S. Bank.

The group plans a Veterans Day dinner fund-raiser at 7 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 10, at the Tonasket Eagles.

Dinner guests can view memorabilia and displays, and hear a service on prisoners of war and those missing in action, according to event coordinator Shirley Schawb, leader of American Legion Auxiliary Unit No. 82.

Veterans will eat free, and all others are asked for a suggested donation of \$7 per adult and \$3 per child.

The team also will host a Veterans Day parade Nov. 11 through town to the legacy site, Schroedel said.

More information is available from George Frank, 486-2747; Bill Schroedel, 486-1952, or www.usaflegacytonasket.org.