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## Houston National Cemetery to grow

By LINDSAY WISE Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

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The Department of Veterans Affairs on Tuesday announced a \$1 million contract to begin expansion and improvements at the 44-year-old Houston National Cemetery.

The 419-acre cemetery is the second largest national cemetery in the region. As of last year, the former dairy farm at 10410 Veterans Memorial Drive hosted nearly 67,800 graves, including three belonging to Medal of Honor recipients.

“By awarding this design contract, we begin the process of expanding and improving this historic national shrine,” Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki said in a statement. “Texas Veterans have come to expect high standards from Houston National Cemetery, and we are certain this project will be in keeping with that tradition.”

The VA awarded the contract — valued at \$1,120,559 — to RVI Planning of Austin, which will prepare construction documents to develop 20 acres into new burial sections, including 14,000 double-depth crypt grave sites, more than 5,700 columbarium niches and 3,500 pre-placed crypts in existing burial sections.

### 23,750 more grave sites

The layout and design work by RVI Planning is part of a six-phase, \$35 million project to add 23,750 grave sites and about 6,000 cremation

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sites to the cemetery, said Jorge Lopez, the cemetery's director.

“At the rate the veterans are dying — imagine that World War II veterans are dying at a rate of 1,200 a day and now Korea veterans are coming in and Vietnam (veterans) — they're estimating that the demand for our services is going to peak in 2010 and so on, so we have to create more grave space for the customers,” Lopez said.

“It's long overdue,” said Michael Contreras, District 4 commander for Veterans of Foreign Wars, a nonprofit that organizes honor details at the cemetery. “Usually we average anywhere from 40 to 60 funerals a month.”

The project also includes plans for a new public information center and restrooms, committal shelter, access roads and parking, fencing, signs and landscaping, as well as repairs to old storm sewers, electrical systems and maintenance facilities.

Construction is expected to start in 2011 and should be completed within two years, Lopez said.

[lindsay.wise@chron.com](mailto:lindsay.wise@chron.com)

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