

Irvine

Veterans cemetery opposed

Asian residents cite cultural taboo, property values

Associated Press

IRVINE — A former air base that may become the Southern California Veterans Cemetery is being opposed by residents concerned about cultural taboos and property values.

Asian residents say a state cemetery on the 125-acre Great Park site that was formerly the El Toro air base would violate a cultural taboo of living near the dead, the Orange County Register reported. Residents are also worried property values will be damaged.

Orange County Veterans Memorial Park Foundation Chairman Bill Cook, a Vietnam War-era veteran who served at El Toro and has led the fight for its conversion to a cemetery since the

air base closed in 1999, said the site is “where thousands of American teenagers last stood alive on American soil.”

But in feng shui — the ancient Chinese practice of spatial arrangement to promote health, harmony and prosperity — a cemetery near homes or schools is a constant reminder of mortality and death. Portola High School would be within sight of the cemetery. Nearly 40 percent of the residents in Irvine identify as Asian, though many don't necessarily follow the same cultural practices.

Dongping Huang, speaking at a recent Irvine City Council meeting, said she lives about two minutes from the Great Park and was shocked when she found out a cemetery was being proposed “in my backyard, next to my son's future school.”

“We respect the veterans. ... They fight for our freedom,” she said. They should rest in a “quiet, beautiful area,” not amid soccer fields, Huang said. If the cemetery is built, she said she would likely move.

About 130,000 veterans live in Orange County, and nearly 1.9 million live in California. The state formally identified the site for a cemetery last year, but state Department of Veterans Affairs officials said the project still needs millions of dollars, and they won't apply for federal funding until July 2016 at the earliest. If they get funding, it could still be years before a cemetery is developed.

Orange County Supervisor Todd Spitzer said a 288-acre parcel in his district near Anaheim Hills might also work, but he still supports the Great Park location.