

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Taking Care of Veterans

October has been an important legislative month for the veterans of Massachusetts. The men and women who served in the nation's armed forces from World War II to Vietnam generally seek no distinction from the rest of the folks in our town. Yet occasionally a legislative issue arises that draws them to the attention of the legislature.

This year there were two such issues, pensions and cemeteries, both of which are now successfully resolved. Income taxes for retired military pensions were eliminated, and a state veterans' cemetery in Agawam.

Here is how those events came to pass.

First the pension issue. A quirk in the state constitution mandates that military pensions be subject to state taxes, unlike the tax-free status of social security and state pensions. The state has tried to exempt them, and most career military personnel assume they will have tax free military pensions. Military retirement is funded entirely by the government, so Massachusetts has been required to treat it the same as any other non-contributory pension. The Supreme Judicial Court has rejected legislative attempts to exempt military pensions because the constitution requires all income from the same category to be taxed equally.

This year the legislature tried a new approach. A new bill was sent to the state's high court for a ruling on constitutionality before we dealt with the bill. Once the court gave its approval to the bill, we quickly enacted it into law, making it retroactive to January 1997. The signing of the law provides substantial savings for any retired resident veteran and gives future retirees a reason to come to Massachusetts.

October also saw the groundbreaking of a new veterans' cemetery in the town of Agawam. This very different issue has also been an important concern for many area veterans and their families. Until now, the town of Bourne has had the only cemetery in the state, a site that is remote from our region. Recognizing the need for additional acreage, the federal government has recently invited states to build new cemeteries for veterans, funded equally by state and federal dollars.

Edward Squazza, an Agawam farmer, heard of the state's need for cemetery land and came forward to donate his 57 acre farm to that cause. Mr. Squazza spent the years of World War II tending his farm, and he has offered that farm to serve as the final resting place for veterans and their spouses. State funding was secured in negotiations with the Veteran's Administration were successfully completed; and the groundbreaking with full military ceremony was held last week. I was proud to witness the genesis of the new burial ground.

The veterans who travelled to the groundbreaking ceremony are living proof of the importance of our efforts. Friends and strangers, they had taken the time to spend an October morning on a field still showing the stubble from the season's crop to dedicate a resting place for themselves and their comrades in arms.

As much as the financial security of increased pensions we served these veterans by providing the emotional security of a final resting place for the men and women who served in the defense of our nation.