

## Cherokee park could house nation's first homeless veteran statue

### STATUE

By Thomas Hartwell

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Cherokee Veterans Park in Macedonia could be the site of the nation's first homeless veterans statue early next year, and invitations to top federal government officials will be sent out for the unveiling, according to local veterans advocates.

Jim Lindenmayer, director of the Cherokee County Homeless Veterans Program said Wednesday that the idea for a homeless veterans awareness monument like the one to be presented to Cherokee County commissioners in coming months is long overdue. Lindenmayer said nearly 1 in 10 residents of Cherokee County are veterans, and the county is second in the state only to Bibb County for population of homeless veterans. He said a particularly moving story of a local family affected by the issue reached Joseph Hickey, owner of Canton Funeral Home and Cemetery at Macedonia Park, and began the awareness campaign and privately funded project.

"There was a Cherokee County mother who was notified that her son, who was a homeless veteran, froze to death in the elements in Kansas City with a Bible in his hand," Lindenmayer said. "(Hickey) was asked to go out there

and bring her son home. And that's one of the first touch points that made him aware ... He called me and asked, 'How bad is this problem?'" Hickey said Monday he had no idea the problem was so widespread before hearing the local mother's story and then meeting with Lindenmayer to get a better understanding. He said when he was brought up to speed, he immediately got to work.

"I'm having a statue made for the homeless veterans, and the reason I did it is because

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**Jim Lindenmayer**

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### STATUE

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I didn't realize it was such a big problem," Hickey said. "If I can bring awareness to something from just one thing I do, it's worth it to me ... This happens to people all over the United States, and I wanted to make it known that these people are suffering. They're living in the woods. They're living in the elements, and it's not because they're poor and it's not because they don't want to work. It's — a lot of times — because they're sick."

the normal steps of county regulation.

Cherokee County Commission Chairman Leavitt "Buzz" Ahrens said though he'll have to wait to see a formal presentation, there are many portions of the early details that he is supportive of. "I think this is a terrific representation of everybody pulling together, and the county didn't pay for it. The community's involved, it will complement the space, and when it's done by groups like Jim's — Jim is 150 percent behind all this kind of stuff — it makes the whole effort in putting that monument ... right at the entrance to those 146 acres," Ahrens, a Navy veteran, said. "I think it would be a terrific outcome."

Lindenmayer estimated that about 40 percent of homeless veterans have some sort of mental illness, and that on any given night, there are about 49,000 veterans living on the street nationwide.

The design for the privately funded statue has been finalized and will come before the Cherokee County Board of Commissioners at a meeting in coming months. Lindenmayer said the majority of the statue was designed and will be built by a Waleska resident and Korean War veteran, and the bottom has been designed by various veteran groups in the Cherokee area. The design will depict a 5-foot-10-inch male and 5-foot-8-inch female veteran, have a pentagon base representing all five military branches and is estimated to weigh approximately four tons.

Lindenmayer said the goal for an unveiling of the statue is Jan. 25, a date representative of the annual “point in time count,” which serves as a gauge for local homeless programs funding. He also said that the Cherokee County Homeless Veterans Program will extend invitations to top government officials, including President Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie and two lieutenant generals.

Cherokee County officials said Wednesday that they have not yet seen final details, but they are supportive of the initiative. Cherokee Recreation and Parks Agency Director Bryan Reynolds said county commissioners will have to approve the statue’s design and other permits for its construction, but the process is not meant to slow or stop the initiative. Reynolds said, just like if someone wanted to build an accessory structure on their property, the statue will go through

Ahrens said the park is well-suited for projects like this one, adding that if more organizations or private entities wanted to make their mark, there are spaces along the walking trails and other open space that could potentially fit those needs. A county-funded veteran monument is currently under construction at the park.

Lindenmayer said he hopes to present to commissioners at either the Nov. 6 or Nov. 20 meeting and to host a dedication at Cherokee Veterans Park on Jan. 25, 2019.

“This is a problem that goes back to the Revolutionary War. Veteran homelessness not a new concept,” he said. “It’s just that no one’s looked at it for a long time.”

The Cherokee County Board of Commissioners meet on the first and third Tuesday of every month at 6 p.m. at 1130 Bluffs Parkway in Canton. For more information on the Cherokee County Homeless Veterans Program, email Jim Lindenmayer at [jlindenmayer80@gmail.com](mailto:jlindenmayer80@gmail.com).



Cherokee County commissioners, parks and recreation officials and supporters celebrate the Cherokee Veterans Park ribbon-cutting in October 2017. / Special



**Buzz Ahrens**



**Bryan Reynolds**