

Veterans Memorial No Place For Peace

BY LISA BLACK

Chicago Tribune
(MCT)

CHICAGO — Shortly after 19-year-old Geoffrey Morris died in 2004 as a Marine fighting in Iraq, his father considered turning the family’s sprawling backyard in Gurnee into a memorial wildlife sanctuary.

It would be only fitting, Kirk Morris thought, since his son had spent so much time there playing paintball with friends, several of whom joined the military in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The father’s idea soon grew into something much larger after village officials offered the use of public land for a veterans memorial and then celebrated the groundbreaking with an appearance by then-Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn in spring 2005.

But today, work on the Heroes of Freedom Memorial has stalled and is the subject of a lawsuit that some blame on a political dispute between Mayor Kristina Kovarik and Kirk Morris, now a trustee on the village board.

After private donors contributed an estimated \$270,000 in materials and services toward the memorial, Kovarik stopped the project, saying the foundation’s plan was not in the village’s “best interests.” The village turned off the lights and removed flags from nine flagpoles at the site, 4580 Old Grand Ave. That was two years ago.

Under a recent appellate court ruling, the village and the PFC Geoffrey Morris Memorial Foundation will now return to Lake County trial court to decide the future of the project. Kovarik says the memorial will be completed one way or the other, but supporters remain hopping mad.

“It’s all political,” said Morris, who was elected as a village trustee in May 2009, several years after starting the nonprofit foundation. “That’s what makes a lot of people unhappy. What was the purpose for this? This would have been a beautiful memorial.”

The foundation had planned to solicit more donations to install a bronze statue of three servicemen surrounded by the flagpoles, a brick walkway and garden.

“It seems like there’s been a lot of



Kirk Morris stands at the site of the Heroes of Freedom Memorial that is under construction in Gurnee, Illinois, on November 9, 2011. Morris’ son, Pfc. Geoffrey Morris, was killed in Iraq in 2004 leading Morris to start raising funds for the memorial.

time and creative effort by the artists that has just fallen flat,” said Jason Jerik, 27, a Marine veteran who played paintball at the Morris house. “It’s really sad. ... It would be a great place where people could come and meet and have solace and remember loved ones.”

After meeting Morris following the death of his son, then-Gurnee Mayor Donald Rudny suggested that a memorial to honor all Midwest veterans of the war against terrorism be placed at the site of a former police station, Rudny said. He also selected the architect who designed the plan. By spring 2005, two more Gurnee-area soldiers had died in Iraq, including Geoffrey’s friend, Sean Maher, 19, also a Warren High School graduate, and Wesley Wells, 21, of Libertyville.

Rudny said he was running for reelection at the time, and some local resi-

dents accused him of using the memorial as a campaign issue, which he denies. He lost the election to Kovarik and has since moved out of state.

For several years, the foundation worked alongside the village, but ran into opposition from Kovarik in fall 2009 when it applied for a building permit, according to court records. She questioned the foundation’s ability to finish the memorial, saying that construction was taking too long, was too costly and was shoddy.

Village and foundation officials then hashed out a contract that detailed a timetable for completing the memorial, spelling out the obligations of both parties and use of foundation funds. The Village Board in a 5-0 vote approved the agreement in December 2009, with Morris recusing himself to avoid a conflict of interest.

Two weeks later, Kovarik vetoed the ordinance that approved the agreement and “stated that the Village intends to take control of the memorial and exclude the foundation from any input or involvement in its construction,” according to court documents.

“I was pretty stunned when the board passed it because it wasn’t in the best interests of the village,” said Kovarik, adding that she was concerned about the costs to maintain the park. “I think they were clouded by emotions.”

Rudny says that he understands why the village trustees asked for a contract that included deadlines for the project. But “to just pull the plug on the whole thing, that didn’t make sense to me,” he said. “I just don’t know why they changed their minds.”

Morris complains that Kovarik never had a problem with the memorial until

he was elected a trustee in spring 2009 and began butting heads with her over the budget, proposed water rate increases and other village issues.

Kovarik denies that politics had anything to do with her veto of the contract. And several other trustees took her side when the village board failed to override her veto in January 2010.

“The foundation did this (work) very independently,” said Kovarik, adding that the village still intends to finish the memorial. “We helped ... but we never had any say over the design. It’s our property, and we will have to take care of it and maintain it. We have some ideas about that.”

In February 2010, Morris and the foundation filed a lawsuit against the village in an attempt to continue work on the memorial. A Lake County Circuit Court dismissed the suit, which the foundation appealed. Last month, the appellate court ordered that the case be returned to trial court.

At issue now is whether the village must compensate the foundation for its donations of time, money and labor.

Morris and the foundation “have to prove their claim, which is that the village was unjustly enriched by the improvements to the property,” said Julie Tappendorf, a lawyer representing Gurnee. “That is going to be a decision for the trial court to make.”

The appellate court ruling suggested the foundation’s claim will hinge on the actions the village takes to complete the memorial.

Lt. Col. Morgan Mann, a Marine reservist and chairman for the foundation, said he hopes to see the memorial be constructed as intended in Gurnee. But if not, the group plans to find a new location, he said.

“For me, it’s all about getting the memorial built,” Mann said. “We want to see it through to completion.”

Kovarik said she simply wants to see the memorial done right.

“There are plenty of people in the community interested in making this a park in honor of these young men,” Kovarik said. “When we are out from under the litigation we will see how much of (the foundation’s plan) is still usable and make sure it is something sustainable for the village for the long run.”

U.S. Steps Up Criticism Of Egypt’s Leaders

BY BRADLEY KLAPPER

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration on Tuesday sharply stepped up its criticism of Egypt’s ruling council for its role in a wave of violence that has left 29 dead in the last four days, and demanded that military leaders hand over power to civilians as promised before July.

The standoff since Saturday has become Egypt’s most sustained challenge to nine months of military rule and has plunged the country into crisis.

While the United States was slow to back the protesters who ended Hosni Mubarak’s three-decade authoritarian rule, it is now scrambling to leverage what little influence it still has to ensure the Egyptian military sticks to its election timeline and adopts a softer approach to the civil unrest.

That’s because the U.S. still sees the council of generals under Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi as the best hope to shepherd Egypt’s difficult transition to democracy. The ideal transition would start with free and fair parliamentary elections next week and end with a civilian president taking the reins by the end of June, as Tantawi promised Tuesday. But much of that vision depends on civil order being re-

established.

“The violence needs to stop,” White House press secretary Jay Carney told reporters aboard Air Force One. “The Egyptians need to be able to decide their future and decide it in a peaceful manner.”

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland on Monday called the deaths “deplorable,” but refused to directly criticize Egyptian authorities. She spoke Tuesday in far shaper terms.

“We condemn the excessive force used by the police,” Nuland said Tuesday. “We strongly urge the Egyptian government to exercise maximum restraint, to discipline its forces and to protect the universal rights of all Egyptians to peacefully express themselves.”

Tantawi tried Tuesday to meet some of the demands of Egypt’s demonstrators, announcing presidential elections by the end of June. But the major concession was immediately rejected by tens of thousands in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, who responded with chants of “leave, leave” now. Authorities said protesters were attempting to storm the Interior Ministry, which is in charge of the police.

The demonstrators say the military council should step down immediately and hand over

authority to a “salvation government” run by civilians and unimpeded by the top army brass. “The people want to bring down the field marshal,” they shouted in scenes starkly reminiscent of the uprising that ousted Mubarak.

For the Obama administration, the instability reflects a somewhat similar dilemma to nine months ago. It wants to stand with the Egyptian people and for democracy, but fears instability or the rise of intolerant, post-revolution populism as occurred in Iran some three decades ago.



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