

Washington, DC -- Congressman Vern Buchanan (R-FL 13) announced today that the U.S. Veterans Administration (VA) has completed the purchase of land for a new national veterans cemetery in Sarasota County. The VA paid \$14 million for 295 acres of cattle ranch land on Clark Road, four miles east of I-75.

“This is a very encouraging development and represents significant progress in the effort to meet our obligations to area veterans by opening a national cemetery in this region,” said Buchanan. “Florida’s 13th Congressional District is home to more than 97,000 men and women who have served in our armed forces. This cemetery will help ensure they are placed to rest close to home and with the honor and dignity they deserve. “

Buchanan noted that at least 378,000 veterans live within 75 miles of the site. Currently, the closest VA cemetery is Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell, Florida, which is about 110 miles from the City of Sarasota. U.S. Veterans Secretary Jim Nicholson selected the site, previously known as the Hawkins Ranch, for the development of the cemetery.

“Southwestern Florida is a priority for providing a new national shrine for veterans,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson. “The purchase of this land is the first step in honoring our commitment to provide final resting places and lasting tributes to America's veterans and their families.”

“We are excited to learn that the acquisition of the Hawkins property has taken place,” said Rich Swier, who is president of the Sarasota County Veterans Commission and chaired the Sarasota National Cemetery Advisory Committee assisting the VA with the location, purchase, and design of the site. “This action keeps the Sarasota National Cemetery on track. We are thankful for the personal attention paid by Congressman Buchanan on our national cemetery. His work on this and other veterans issues is most appreciated by all our veterans and their families.”

Veterans with a discharge other than dishonorable, their spouse and dependent children are eligible for burial in the cemetery. The VA anticipates the first burials to occur in the fall of 2008. The president’s fiscal year 2008 budget includes \$27.8 million for the first phase of development, which includes 18,200 grave sites on 60 acres. The firm Miller Leg has been contracted to design the cemetery.

Buchanan is a member of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs.