

# Melissa Fox for California

A Blog about Making California an Even Better Place to Live, Work and Raise a Family



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## Orange County Veterans Deserve a Final Resting Place. The ARDA is the Only Site that has a Real Chance of Receiving the Necessary Funding. Let's Get it Done!

I have been fighting for a veterans cemetery on the hallowed grounds of the former El Toro Marine Air Station for many years, beginning in 2013.



As I wrote to the Irvine City Council in early 2014:

“Orange County has a long and proud military tradition. Currently, more than two million veterans live in California – more than in any other state. This military tradition continues into the present, as nearly 7,000 veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars live in Orange County. Yet Orange County veterans do not have their own official military cemetery and those in Orange County who want to

visit a veteran’s grave in a national cemetery must travel to Riverside, San Diego or Los Angeles counties.”

“It is time that Orange County offered its veterans – who have sacrificed so much for us – a final resting place close to their families and loved ones. I believe that a portion of the Great Park in Irvine, which was once the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, would be an altogether fitting and proper location for this Orange County Veterans Cemetery, as well as a lasting memorial to the Great Park’s military heritage.”

“As an Irvine resident and a member of the Irvine Community Services Commission – and as the daughter of an Orange County Korean War combat veteran – I urge you to create an Orange County Veterans Cemetery and, also, to locate this cemetery in a portion of the Great Park that was once the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station.”



On March 11, 2014, I cheered when the City Council unanimously voted to designate the Amended and Restated Development Agreement [ARDA] site in the Orange County Great Park in Irvine as the future site of a veterans cemetery.



But when I became an Irvine City Councilmember in 2016, I learned that there had been no progress on a veterans cemetery in the intervening two years because, I was informed, of the high cost of the decontamination and demolition necessary on the originally designated ARDA site. Because the ARDA site did not appear to be financially viable, I, along with the Orange County Veteran's Memorial Park Foundation and many national and local veterans organizations,

supported the Strawberry Field site as a less expensive, more practical, and faster alternative.

When the voters rejected the Strawberry Fields site as causing too much traffic and being too close to the freeway, I then proposed, along with Irvine City Councilmember Christina Shea, using a portion of the Orange County Great Park (and the former MCAS El Toro) that is currently planned for a golf course to be used instead for a veterans cemetery.



Subsequently, a site was proposed in Anaheim Hills near the 91 Freeway. While I am not opposed to that site, the fact is that it has not received support from the Assembly, has not received any financial backing from either the county, state, or federal government, and is not located on the historically appropriate grounds of the former MCAS El Toro. It does not appear to be viable.

Now several of our state legislators have recently indicated a strong preference for the

ARDA site originally designated by the Irvine City Council.

**Assembly Bill 368**, authored by Assemblymember Sharon Quirk-Silva (AD 65) and currently before the Assembly Veterans Affairs Committee, states that the California Department of Veterans Affairs “shall acquire, study, design, develop, construct, and equip a state-owned and state-operated Southern California Veterans Cemetery, which shall be located at the site of the former Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, on 125 acres known as the Amended and Restated Development Agreement [ARDA] Site in the Orange County Great Park in the City of Irvine.”

Significantly, several members of the legislature, from both sides of the aisle — Democrats Senator Thomas J. Umberg (SD 34) and Assemblymembers Sharon Quirk-Silva (AD 65) and Tom Daily (AD 69) and Republican Assemblymembers Tyler Diep (AD 72), William Brough (AD 73) and Philip Chen (AD 55) — have pledged to allocate the funds necessary for the decontamination of the site and the construction of a veterans cemetery in that location and urged the Irvine City Council to re-designate it as the official site.

Their letter states, "Today, we are ready to work with State and Federal officials to secure funding for the Southern California Veterans Memorial Park and Cemetery. We ask that you stand by your previous commitment to provide a resting place for California veterans at the ARDA site."

In addition, Nick Berardino, President of VALOR (Veterans Alliance of Orange County) and a Marine Corps



veteran of the Vietnam War, who has been advocating for a veterans' cemetery for years, has responded to the legislator's letter by saying "We are excited that the legislature is poised to support the veterans cemetery and impressed that the Orange County delegation is able to secure the funding in this year's budget."

On April 9, 2019, **Assembly Bill 368** was **unanimously approved** for passage by the

Assembly Veterans Affairs Committee and referred to the Appropriations Committee.

Accordingly, it is now clear that *the only site* that has a real chance of receiving the necessary funding for an Orange County veterans cemetery is the ARDA site.



For this reason, I am withdrawing my support for the golf course site option and joining with these state legislators in calling for the Irvine City Council to again designate the ARDA as *the* site for a veterans cemetery and calling on the state and federal government to provide the funding needed to build a veterans cemetery on the ARDA site in the Great Park on the hallowed grounds of the former El Toro Marine Station.

Further, this month, United States Representative Gilbert Cisneros (CA 39), a retired naval officer and a member of the Congressional

Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies has urged the federal government to step up and provide financial help for our long-overdue veterans cemetery in Orange County. He wrote to the Subcommittee: "I urge you to provide increased funding for the Veterans State Cemetery Grant program in order to support a veterans cemetery in Orange County. With 3.19 million residents, Orange County has a disproportionately high population of veterans. However, it does not have a single veterans cemetery. Local veterans have been campaigning for a veterans cemetery for years, but the federal government has failed to rise to the occasion. While local entities are pursuing a state veterans cemetery, federal funding should be made available in order to get this project across the finish line. I urge you to increase the VA's State Cemetery Grant program funding to ensure this long overdue project does not suffer any further delays."

Along with the Orange County Veterans Memorial Park Foundation, which has led the fight years-long fight for an Orange County veterans cemetery, I say "Hurrah!" to Rep. Cisneros' letter.





Based on all these factors, as a member of the Irvine City Council, I hereby fully commit to the goal of building a Southern California Veterans Cemetery on the grounds of the former MCAS El Toro at the ARDA site.

I look forward to working in a positive, bipartisan way with our state and federal representatives, other Irvine City Councilmembers, the Orange County Veterans Memorial Park Foundation, veterans organizations, community groups, and private donors, doing whatever it takes and pulling together in the same direction, to finally establish the Orange County veterans cemetery that we have fought for and needed for so long.

Our veterans deserve a final resting place close to their families and loved ones.

Let's get it done.