

Heritage Park Monument Approved by Dana Point City Council

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By Kaila Mellos

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During the Tuesday, April 15, Dana Point City Council meeting, the council and staff reviewed a proposal application from the Dana Point 5th Marine Regiment Support Group (DPMRSG) to install a monument in Heritage Park that aims to honor Marines and their families.

“For the past 18 years, it has been my honor to serve this organization,” Support Group President Terry Rifkin said. “For much of that time, I have dreamed of a permanent tribute in Dana Point, a meaningful public acknowledgement of this powerful adoption between the Fifth Marine Regiment and our city of Dana Point. That time has come.”

With a crowd erupting into a cheer at the 5-0 approval from the City Council to move forward with the proposal, with the exception of a few trees that were laid out in the design, the monument project is now in the fundraising phase.

In collaboration with the DPMRSG, the proposal brought by staff has developed a framework for the City Council’s consideration to advance this monument project. Detailed in this, the city will oversee the construction of all site improvements and the installation of project

components provided by the DPMRSG, which will be the statue, tablets, benches, plaques, and inscription services for pavers.

The estimated project cost is \$220,000, covering site improvements and initial project components. The DPMRSG intends to begin fundraising immediately, contingent on the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the city.

Based on the fundraising schedule, the project aims to enter the implementation phase, with work expected to begin as soon as feasible, likely in 2026, according to staff documents. When appropriate, staff will bid out the construction contract and return to the council to award the contract and approve the project budget, which recommends a contribution of \$110,000.

In a previous interview with the *Dana Point Times*, Rifkin said the concept for this monument honors “the force behind the force.” This was prompted by a comment from a Marine years ago that has stuck with her in the years since the city adopted the 5th Marine Regiment in 2004 and the Dana Point 5th Marine Regiment Support Group was incorporated in 2008.

“A Marine said to me, ‘You know, we just love all the monuments you’ve done at Camp Pendleton, but how come we never thank and celebrate the families?’ ” Rifkin said.

“So, that conversation with that Marine stuck in my mind, and about three to four years ago, I started working on something that would honor the families,” Rifkin continued. “I found a sculptor out of Colorado – his name is Sutton Betti – and I found this image of ‘Returning Home’ ... and I’ve been to so many farewells and welcome-homes that this to me depicted the family.”

The monument will feature a bronze sculpture of a Marine reuniting with their family in front of a granite backdrop. The granite slab will include text about the importance of families, Rifkin said. The statue would be located on the walkway on Golden Lantern leading up to Heritage Park.

Now that the monument has been approved to move forward, Rifkin noted that the support group will begin to offer sponsorship opportunities for the statue.

“We will invite our patriotic community locally and across the country to be part of this legacy,” Rifkin said. “Sponsorships at the monument site will include inscribed pavers, bronze plaques on a wall of honor, patriotic stars and stripes on the concrete, and two concrete benches. It’s a chance to honor a veteran, recognize a loved one, or highlight a business that supports our military.”

As a few councilmembers have served in different branches, including Michael Villar in the Marines, this project will mean a lot to not only the community but also to the council.

“As a retired Marine, it was super important to me that we did this,” Villar said. “Little things like his boots weren’t originally tucked in correctly, or he wasn’t wearing military or Marine Corps cammies, or the positioning of his hand – just little things that you were willing to work with me and with the other councilmembers as well; you met with each of us, and that was super important to me, personally.”