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Decision to limit crowd at park event Friday catches some Port officials off guard

The Stars and Stripes Honor Flight will dedicate its World War II monument on Port Washington's coal dock Friday afternoon in a ceremony that will give about 150 people their first look at the coal dock property — but not the general public.

The news that the 3 p.m. ceremony to dedicate the memorial, a replica of the Wisconsin Pillar at the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., is by invitation only surprised some city officials.

"I thought it was open to anybody," Ald. Paul Neumyer said. "I'm at a loss. It's city controlled property. I always thought public property was open to everybody."

Joe Dean, a city alderman and chairman of the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight board, said the group decided to make the dedication an invitation-only event because of the vagaries of the weather.

"The weather is unpredictable and we have a tent that seats 150 people," Dean said. "This is not meant to be controversial."

Invitations went out to key veterans and volunteers who have given years of service to the Honor Flight and its efforts to take World War II veterans to Washington, D.C., to visit the memorial dedicated to them, he said.

Members of the Port Washington-Saukville Rotary Club also received invitations.

"We wanted to be sure they have a place," Dean said. "We're trying to do something nice for our vets, period. I think the vast number of people understand that."

If other people show up for the ceremony, they won't be turned away, he said, adding organizers request a reservation through the Stars and Stripes website.

The grand opening of the coal dock planned for June will be for the community, Dean added.

"Everyone will be welcome to view it when we have the open house," he said.

Ald. Jim Vollmar said he, too, was surprised to learn the dedication is by invitation only.

“Most dedications should be open to the public,” he said. “The question to me is whether the coal dock is ready to be open.”

With construction crews continuing to work on infrastructure for the coal dock park, Vollmar said, there may be safety issues.

Port Washington Mayor Tom Mlada concurred, saying the constraints of construction would make it difficult for large numbers of people to get to the memorial.

“I think it’s the reality of logistics,” he said. “I see a sense of urgency with the timing of the event, given the age of the veterans.

“I think we’ve got to get construction done and get through the challenges of the weather, and in June we’re going to have a very large grand opening event.”

Friday’s event will include performances by the Thomas Jefferson Middle School choir and vocalist Jenny Thiel, a presentation of colors by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, remarks by a variety of dignitaries and the reading of a eulogy for a World War II soldier by Abby Cibulka, an eighth-grader at John Long Middle School in Grafton.

Veterans Harvey Kurz and Joe Demler will place a wreath at the site.

Image Information: SMOOTHING CONCRETE along the promenade at the north end of the coal dock early this week was Jesse Keller of Cascade. Photo by Sam Arendt