

WWII vets support Mother Canada statue plan for Victoria County

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Second World War veterans Joseph Burke and Rod C. MacNeil support the proposed Mother Canada statue for Green Cove. They say a lasting monument for Canada's war dead is needed in Cape Breton. (ANDREW RANKIN / Cape Breton Bureau)

Rod C. MacNeil would welcome a towering statue in his municipality commemorating his Second World War comrades.

His only concern with the controversial Mother Canada project is the structure's proposed height. The Barra Glen resident, who served as a rifleman at the tail end of the Second World War, says the statue needn't be 24 metres high.

"You have to consider the cost of maintenance," said MacNeil, 91. "But beyond that, I think it's a fine idea. If there's somebody willing to raise this money to build a monument like that in a place like Green Cove, let them go ahead and do it."

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MacNeil is well aware of the local and national controversy surrounding the \$25-million memorial to Canada's war dead proposed for Green Cove in Victoria County. The majority of detractors are unhappy with the size and design of the project and argue that it has no business being built in Cape Breton Highlands National Park, on Parks Canada protected land.

But MacNeil, who lives in the county where the project is proposed to be built, doesn't buy that argument. He says the monument would occupy a small area of the park, while providing a dramatic reminder of the ultimate sacrifice his comrades have made through the generations.

"I was so disappointed with all the objections," he said. "Victoria County is a perfect place to have a memorial given that so many men from the area made a tremendous contribution to the war effort. That a monument would be in a national park, people might think about that more often. Look, we have so much wilderness, why begrudge another acre or two?"

"Here's someone willing to remember the sacrifices that were made. I like that part of it. Besides Remembrance Day, I'm not sure many people take time to understand or appreciate what their sacrifice means. For many, World War II is like the battle of Romans and the Carthaginians. It happened so long ago, it's none of their business.

"This would be something."

Two years ago, the Never Forgotten National Memorial Foundation announced plans to build the project, but concerns remain whether taxpayers would be on the hook for millions of dollars if the project goes ahead. Proponents argue that the site, which would feature a three-rise observation deck, would draw 173,000 people in its first year.

Joseph Burke, a Second World War veteran who fought on the front lines in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany, also supports the project for a simple reason.

"Because it is dedicated to the ones overseas," the Sydney resident said. "I like the design and I like that it's planned for Victoria County where so many young men (from there) served during the war effort. Why all the questions? But I'm not going to complain about all the opposition. I keep it to myself."

The project is under review by Parks Canada. The agency, which is under the jurisdiction of the Department of Environment and Climate Change, wouldn't say how long the process might take. Spokeswoman Natalie Fay said in an e-mail that the agency still has several factors to consider.

“There are many elements to be considered before the project can move forward including the environmental impact assessment and the related public consultation, the success of the Never Forgotten National Memorial Foundation’s private fundraising campaign and adherence to the Canada National Parks Act and other applicable legislation,” she said.