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## Jacksonville to Fund New Veterans Shade Structure with Nighttime Tribute Lighting

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A planned shade structure at Jacksonville's Veterans Memorial Wall is moving forward with \$2 million proposed in the city's 2025–2026 budget. The project aims to bring relief from the sun, lower costs from annual tent rentals, and enhance the monument site with lighting that honors all military branches.

The granite wall, which memorializes over 1,700 fallen service members from the Jacksonville area, sits just outside EverBank Stadium in a sprawling asphalt lot. While the community considers it sacred ground, the Florida heat often makes it an uncomfortable

place for reflection. Mayor Donna Deegan's budget plan allocates millions to create a permanent covered structure with overhead fans and military-themed lights that would glow after dark.

The proposed construction costs between \$5.7 million and \$6.8 million, depending on the lighting system selected. The city plans to seek public and private funding to fully finance the project. Supporters believe a permanent structure would improve comfort and aesthetics and save money by replacing the \$140,000 tents used each Memorial Day.

The design, created by the Haskell Company, includes a "Circle of Reflection" shade structure supported by seven columns representing a branch of the United States Armed Forces: Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Space Force, Coast Guard, and Merchant Marine. The roof would feature a perforated star pattern that casts gentle shadows during the day, while programmable or LED lighting would illuminate the space at night in tribute.

## Community Support

Jacksonville City Council members have endorsed the plan. Councilman Chris Miller said he's eager to see faster progress. "I know things in government don't always move quickly, but I was hoping we'd be a little further along," he said during a recent meeting with fellow council member Will Lahnen.

The shade structure is seen as a practical improvement and a commitment to the city's identity. Harrison Conyers, director of the city's Military Affairs and Veterans Department, said the wall's original construction was a community effort, and he's confident that Jacksonville residents will step up again. "This is a patriotic city," Conyers said. "I believe people will support this project just like they did the wall itself."

The city has already invested \$202,000 into design and engineering, and the new budget would add another \$2 million to keep the momentum going. The next step involves soliciting formal proposals from firms to finalize plans and compare construction costs to current estimates.

Meanwhile, a second veterans-focused project is gaining traction: a proposed Veterans and Military Families Community Center near Hogans Creek. The envisioned two-story facility would include mental health services, career training, a fitness center, and a café, with nearby access to outdoor recreation via the future Emerald Trail.

Councilman Lahnen is working to shift \$600,000 in unused funds from a separate project to cover the center's design and planning. Once the blueprints are complete, the city also plans to seek federal grants. "This would be the keystone project for us if we're able to stand it up," Conyers said.

The new facility is designed to appeal to a younger generation of veterans who may not be drawn to traditional halls. Lahnen emphasized the importance of creating a multi-generational space, suggesting a focus group to ensure the project reflects the needs and interests of veterans of all ages.

With both projects advancing, Jacksonville is working to live up to its pledge to be one of the most military-friendly cities in the country.