Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board

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Date: December 7, 2026
To: Members of the Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board (CAAPB)
From: Ellison Yahner, Planner Fellow, CAAPB
CC: Erik Cedarleaf Dahl, Executive Secretary, CAAPB

Commemorative Work Addition Request: Gold Star Blue Star Memorial Plaque

Introduction

CAAPB staff received an application to add a new commemorative plaque at the Court of Honor honoring Gold Star and Blue Families from Cole Trace, Legislative Liaison for the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) on October 7, 2025. CAAPB staff found the application complete three days later.

During the June 4, 2026, CAAP Board meeting, the Board affirmed the application's fulfillment of the "Conditions of Addition" outlined in Subpart 2 of the *Standards for Commemorative Artwork* (Minnesota Rule 2400.2703) and authorized staff to open a 30-day public comment period and hold a public hearing on the addition request.

CAAPB staff opened and completed the public comment period between June 22 and July 22, 2026, and a public hearing was held July 21, 2026, at Capitol Commons (546 Rice Street) from 4:00 – 5:00 pm. The hearing concerned the application's fulfillment of the conditions for addition outlined in Minnesota Rule 2400.2703, Subpart 2.

No public comments on the application were received during the public comment period, nor at the public hearing in regard to adding this new commemorative work.

More information on the Gold Star Blue Star application, as well as details regarding its public comment period and hearing, can be found on CAAPB's website.



Fig 1. Gold Star and Blue Star emblems

Description from the Application Submitted by Cole Trace, Legislative Liaison, Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs

The artwork is a bronze plaque installed at the Court of Honor on the Minnesota State Capitol grounds. It will pay tribute to both Gold Star and Blue Star Families, who have endured loss, and shoulder uncertainty, in support of loved ones serving in the United States Armed Forces. Situating the plaque where Minnesota's history is celebrated and its future shaped, the state formally acknowledges the sacrifices made behind the uniform.

Located at the south end of the Minnesota State Capitol Mall, the Court of Honor is defined by curved walls on either side of the Minnesota WWII Veterans Memorial which display bronze plaques commemorating conflicts men and women who served and sacrificed in support of our state and nation. These plaques memorialize a wide range of conflicts and individuals, including the Spanish American War, World War Two, the Korean Conflict, a former Military Order of the Purple Heart Commander, the 194th Light Tank Battalion, among others. Being a 'Gold Star Family' is a title no family wants. Initiated during World War I, it distinguished a family who lost a loved one in military service. Today, immediate family members (parents, siblings, spouse, or child) receive a Gold Star from the Department of Defense to honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

After securing gubernatorial approval and legislative authorization, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) plans to commission this plaque as a lasting testament to family members forever changed by military service. It extends the MDVA's existing Gold Star Family program—already providing benefits, resources, and community—for a public memorial that ensures every story is woven into the fabric of our Capitol grounds.

Defining Gold Star and Blue Star Families Gold Star Families

The term dates to World War I, when service flags displayed a blue star for each family member in uniform. The loss of a service member meant replacing the blue star with gold. Today, the Department of Defense issues Gold Star lapel pins to honor those who have fallen. This plaque promises that no family's grief will be forgotten and that a sacrificed life will remain engraved in our collective memory. Blue Star Families originating from the same service-flag tradition, a blue star represents an active duty, National Guard, Reserve, or transitioning service member. Behind every deployment are missed milestones, long nights, and steadfast hope. This memorial makes their quiet endurance visible, affirming that Minnesota stands beside them just as they hold the line at home.

Funding

Applicants are responsible for funding all commemorative works additions, removals, and modifications in the Capitol Area. Cole Trace notes in his application that the MDVA will fund the design, casting, and installation of the plaque from its existing discretionary budget, with an expectation that total project costs do not exceed $10,000. If project costs surpass this amount, the MDVA will partner with other organizations to raise supplementary funds.

Demonstrating availability of funding is not a condition for application.

Staff Completeness Check

On October 7, 2025, CAAPB staff received an application from Cole Trace, Legislative Liaison for the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), to add a new commemorative plaque to the Court of Honor honoring Gold Star and Blue Star families.

CAAPB staff reviewed the application within the required 10-day window and found it to be complete. The applicant was notified of this determination on October 10, 2025.

Application and Review Process

The CAAPB application and review process for commemorative work addition requests is outlined in Subpart 3 of the *Standards of Commemorative Artwork* (Minnesota Rule 2400.2703).

Broadly speaking, this process consists of:

1. a staff completeness check vis-à-vis the conditions for addition and summary of the request;
2. review of the memorial concept;
3. public comment on the memorial concept;
4. site selection; and
5. design review.

A graphic representation of the application and review process for modification requests is provided in Attachment B. Board authorization is required at many points through the process.

Staff Review under the "Conditions for Adding New Artwork"

CAAPB staff is required to analyze all commemorative work addition requests' fulfillment of the "*Conditions for adding new artwork*" found in Minnesota Rules 2400.2703, subpart 2 (listed below). It is CAAPB staff's assessment that the application meets these conditions.

Subpart. 2. Conditions for adding new artwork. […]

A. there has been documented public support of the artwork;
B. the artwork has lasting statewide significance for Minnesotans;

C. the artwork is respectful of the diversity of Minnesotans;
D. viewing the artwork provides a rich experience to broaden the understanding of Minnesota's shared history, heritage, and culture; and
E. if an individual is the subject of an artwork, the individual must […]

Regarding Item A, public support for the addition request is made evident through the proposed work's legislative success and gubernatorial approval. The plaque was authorized under Chapter 30, Article 2, Section 14 of the Minnesota legislature's 2025 Veterans and Military Affairs omnibus bill (SF 1959). This bill passed both State houses with strong margins and bipartisan support. See: Attachment C for the authorizing legislation.

It is furthermore staff's opinion that the application holds lasting statewide significance and demonstrates respect for the diversity of Minnesotans (Items B and C). As the applicant notes, veterans and their families are representative of a broad cross-section of the population. This population includes residents of both metropolitan areas and Greater Minnesota, people with disabilities, Native Americans, those from multiple generations, as well as Black and Latine/Latinx Minnesotans, African immigrants, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), and people in the LGBTQIA2S+ communities. The memorial, in other words, brings to the fore the rich cultural and social diversity of Gold Star and Blue Star families across the state and elevates them in Minnesota's cultural memory.

Finally, it is staff's opinion that the application fulfills Item D by providing an important educational element on the Capitol grounds. Specifically, the memorial builds on the growth of monuments dedicated to civilian service on the Lower Mall, thereby elevating home-front contributions and sacrifices on the Mall. The memorial also serves as a permanent testament to MDVA's Gold Star Family program, which provides benefits, resources, and community to Gold Star families statewide.

Item E does not apply.

With CAAPB staff's determination that the application met the conditions for addition outlined in Minnesota Rules, part 2400.2703, subpart 2, requested and received CAAP Board approval on June 4, 2026, for staff to open a 30-day public comment period and host at least one public meeting to gather input from the public on the application for the Board's consideration. The public comment period was held between June 22 and July 22, 2026, and a public hearing was held July 21, 2026, at Capitol Commons (56 Rice Street) from 4:00 – 5:00 pm. The hearing fulfilled the conditions for addition of the application outlined in Minnesota Rule, part 2400.2703, subpart 2.

No public comments on the application were received during the public comment period, nor at the public hearing in regard to adding this new commemorative work. Staff prepared a written summary outlining no comments were received on July 28, 2026 (Attachments D and E).

For Board Consideration December 7, 2026

As outlined in Minnesota Rules, part 2400.2703, subpart 3, CAAPB staff is presenting a summary of the public comments (none received, see Attachment D).

With that, the original addition request, the staff report and recommendation, the Board is required to hold an additional public hearing.

Following the hearing, the Board will vote to accept or reject the application in order to direct staff to move forward in the process towards site selection.

Staff Recommendation and Suggested Board Resolution

CAAPB staff recommends the Board consider the following language.

"The Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board ("Board") accepts the addition request for the Gold Star Blue Star memorial plaque, submitted by Cole Trace, Legislative Liaison at the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), and authorizes Board staff and the Board's Advisory Committee to move forward with conducting a site selection study with the applicant and for review with the Department of Administration. Board staff and the Board's Advisory Committee will then recommend a site for the proposed artwork to the Board based on the criteria in Subpart 4.

The Board specifically affirms that:

- After input from the public comment period and public hearings, the addition request continues to satisfy the conditions in Minnesota Rules, part 2400.2703, subpart 2.

The Board specifically authorizes the CAAP Board's Executive Secretary to:

- Notify the applicant and the Department of Administration within 14 calendar days of this approval, as required.
- Begin conducting a site selection study with staff, the Board's Advisory Committee, and the applicant, and review it with the Department of Administration.

The Board wishes to further make clear that approval of these intermediate steps in the Rules process does not communicate approval nor disapproval of any portion of the current proposal by the applicant, and approval of these steps does not equate to agreement or judgment as to the veracity of any claim or assertion within the received application."

Next Steps

If the Board votes to accept the application, as required and directed, CAAP staff will notify the applicant and the Department of Administration within 14 calendar days. Staff and the Board's Advisory Committee will then conduct a site selection study with the applicant and review with the Department of Administration. Given the Gold Star Blue Star plaque's focus on families of U.S. military service and the current plaque space available, the commemorative work site selection is likely to have a focus in the Court of Honor.

CAAP Board will then determine if the proposed location meets the criteria in Subpart 4 (below) and offer the opportunity for public comments at the Board meeting; after doing so, the Board will vote on the location.

Criteria for determining location of new artwork (Minnesota Rules, part 2400.2703, subpart 4.)

The board must use the following criteria to evaluate the proposed location for a commemorative artwork in the Capitol area:

A. The site of the proposed location must be visible to people nearby and accessible to all members of the public.

B. The scale of the artwork must fit the artwork's location, providing familiarity to the viewer while not being overpowering. The artwork's size must not detract from the Capitol. The board must consider the artwork's visual and spatial relationships to the artwork's surroundings.

C. The use of the site must not interfere with any existing artwork.

D. The use of the site must maintain and protect existing open space and the space's public use.

E. The location must follow all applicable zoning, environmental, code, and public safety rules and regulations.

F. The artwork must fit within the thematic organization of the Capitol grounds and comply with the design objectives of the Comprehensive Plan for the Minnesota Capitol Area, which is incorporated by reference in subpart 3, item J. The board must consider the site's relationship to other artwork and the Capitol.

If the Board votes to reject the application, staff will notify the applicant with reasons for the rejection.

Attachments

Attachment A: The full application as submitted by Cole Trace.

Attachment B: A graphic representation of the application and review process for adding a new commemorative work to the Capitol grounds.

Attachment C: Authorizing legislation.
https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/94/2025/0/SF/1959/versions/2/pdf/

Attachment D: Summary of Public Comments.