

Veterans Plaza in Secaucus now has a piece of World Trade Center steel on permanent display

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Bill Baroni, left, Deputy Executive Director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and Secaucus Mayor Michael Gonnelli with the piece of steel from the fallen World Trade Center towers donated by the Port Authority to the Town of Secaucus on Wednesday, April 11, 2012. Reena Rose Sibayan/The Jersey Journal

War veterans, firefighters, police officers, city officials and Port Authority officials gathered in Veterans Plaza in Secaucus Wednesday to ceremoniously unveil a piece of World Trade Center steel.

The roughly 1-foot-long section of beam from the downed Twin Towers will be on permanent display at the Paterson Plank Road plaza, a reminder of the horror of 9/11 and the nation's courageous response to it, officials said.

"I lost some friends that day, so this is an event that had some real significance to me. Just like the John F. Kennedy assassination, it's a day I'll never forget," Mayor Michael Gonnelli, who is also a volunteer firefighter, told The Jersey Journal.

The Port Authority receives thousands of applications for WTC steel, Port Authority Deputy Director Bill Baroni told the Jersey Journal.

“In order to present a municipality with a piece of WTC steel, we actually need to have a federal judge release it since it’s evidence in a crime,” he said.

WTC steel has been sent to all 50 states and seven foreign countries for a total of 1,700 different locations worldwide, he said.

The inscription on the stand the steel sits on at the plaza reads:

“This piece of steel from the WTC towers is dedicated to these brave men & women of U.S. military who have fought since that fateful day to defeat terrorism and enemies of freedom throughout the world.”

Several groups attended Wednesday’s ceremony, including the Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion posts, as well as veterans of the war in Iraq.

“Tragedies like 9/11 are why I wanted to defend my country,” said Marine Luke Smentkowski, 31, a Secaucus native who attended. “It’s an honor to serve people who put their life on the line and commit the ultimate sacrifice.”

Smentkowski suffered a fractured jaw on Oct. 28, 2004 when he was hit by shrapnel from a grenade in Iraq. He has made a full recovery.

Baroni also presented Secaucus with a \$5,000 check to be used to purchase EMS equipment. He praised the town’s police, fire, and EMS units for all the help they’ve to the Port Authority over the years.

Three Secaucus residents died in 9/11: Arlene T. Babakitis, 47; Kenneth Alan Simon, 34; and Michael Anthony Tanner, 44. Steven F. Strobert, 33, formerly of Secaucus, also died in 9/11.

Babakitis was a Port Authority employee.