Beginning Friday, Cannonsburg Ski Area will be transformed into an emotional display of patriotism and reverence for those who lost their lives in the terror attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

The West Michigan Healing Field is anticipated to draw spectators from across the state to view the approximately 3,200 flags that will be erected in honor of each victim.

Flags - with a victim’s biography attached- are still available to be purchased. Families can request or pick out which victim’s flag they would like to sponsor. They also are permitted to keep the flag after the five-day display is complete. Flags are $75 to pick up on Sept. 13 after the healing field closes at 3 p.m. or $80 to have the flags mailed to sponsors’ homes.

Only about 100 flags have been purchased so far. But Sue Bodenner, chairwoman of the West Michigan Healing Field, said according to the Colonial Flag Foundation, the company that helps organize healing fields nationwide, 75 percent of the flags are purchased the day of the opening ceremony.

The proceeds from the flags will be given back to first responder units in West Michigan. Local police, fire, ambulance and other emergency and disaster units will be able to apply for grants through the Rockford Area Community Endowment (RACE). RACE will award the money. Departments could be given up to $40,000.

Bodenner said if all 3,200 flags are sold, more than $200,000 could be doled out to help local units.

At 8 a.m. Friday, the festivities will begin with each victim's name being read while his or her flag is raised. Local dignitaries, including State Rep. Peter MacGregor, R-Cannon Township, and Rockford Superintendent Michael Shibler, will give an address. The Rev. Bob White of Greenville also will offer a prayer.

About 100 Rockford High School students from Student Council and the Rotary Interact Club (formerly known as Youth Initiative) will carry the flags up the ski hill and deposit them into preset poles.

Healing field committee member Jeff Havemeier will be heading up the project of installing the poles into the hill Thursday night.

"We're told it takes five minutes to assemble each flag. Multiply that by 3,200 and we are looking at about 16,000 minutes," he said, expressing thanks that he won't be doing it alone.

Havemeier added the committee is especially grateful for the support of Cannonsburg Ski Area.

"This is the time when they typically get ready for the season, and they have spent a major chunk of it helping us with this," he said. "They've put things off so we can host this event. And there is going to be a lot of foot traffic on their slope and if it rains, it could create a muddy mess. We can't thank them enough for their support."

After the names are read by local radio personalities Friday morning, which will take an estimated 3 to 4 hours, the field will be open to the public 24 hours a day until Sept. 13.

Bodenner said food is not permitted on the site but there will be picnic tables and a separate tent set up for viewers to rest. Each day at sunset a local bagpiper will play.

Saturday has been designated for first responders. An honor guard will be present as will many local police and fire chiefs, and the boys of the Grand Rapids Choir of Men and Boys will sing the national anthem.

On Sunday, the Rockford American Legion Merritt Lamb Post 102 will host "A Day to Remember” and commemorate the sequence of
events as they occurred 10 years ago. There will be a service at noon honoring all of the 9/11 victims.

Monday and Tuesday are being targeted as days for children. Schools are encouraged to bring their students to the ski area to participate in the 2011 Patriot Day Arts Festival.

Story times also will be scheduled around a special "Survivor Tree," Bodenner said.

Integrated into the student field trip days will be lesson plans designed by teachers from schools in the areas near where the attacks took place. Survivors' and victims' families also had input into the lesson plans, Bodenner explained. She said a focus will be placed on how to talk to children about 9/11.

Bodenner added while the programs planned for the five-day healing field event will be wonderful, she is looking forward to the quiet times.

"Watching families react to the stories of the victims on the flags I think will be very emotional and powerful," she said. "Seeing name after name of ordinary people who were traveling home on one of the planes or picking up their dog or the hundreds of simple reasons these victims had to be where they were when the planes crashed or the towers fell - that's when I think we all realize that nobody's life was not impacted by 9/11."

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