

SPEECH by CONGRESSMAN LES AuCOIN
Southwest Portland Rotary Club
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I asked for this opportunity to speak with you today so I could address a community issue that is at the point of no return. The issue is the Portland Veterans Hospital.

By now each of you must be familiar with the long history of this project, culminating in the recent announcement by the Veterans Administration of its intention to build a replacement 490-bed hospital in Portland on Marquam Hill, the site of the existing VA facility.

Reaching this point wasn't easy. First, there was a local argument over whether this replacement hospital should be an urban redevelopment project, which it shouldn't. Then, there was a land-use argument alleging that traffic congestion would be made worse, which it wouldn't. The truth is the project, with expanded parking facilities, would relieve the lines of cars parked along the hill.

As each question was considered, and answered, the years rolled by -- and the costs mounted, to the tune of \$40 million. Meanwhile, new VA hospitals were authorized in seven other U.S. cities -- each lower in the VA medical priority list than Portland's.

Now, we're on the threshold of beginning this long-overdue project. But a new argument is being developed for center stage -- again with the intention of stopping the hospital. This argument, which I'll explain in a moment, is being advanced by individuals who have their own world-view of medical care. And they seem ready to press that view regardless of the consequences to the community and the veteran.

Ironically, pressing this concern in a court of law, as has been threatened, will make the question of whether a new VA Hospital should be built moot. Just one more delay -- a delay of only a few months -- will spell the death of this project.

That is not a threat. It is a fact.

I am here today as a long-time, wholehearted supporter of moving ahead on construction of the VA Hospital in Marquam Hill. I believe we, as a community, are playing with table-stakes issues. And I don't believe this community

wants, or can afford, to surrender what we almost have in hand.

First, let me set out as clearly as I can what is at stake, what we will get if the replacement hospital is built.

For the veteran, the payoff is improved health care in modern facilities. The 490-bed acute care hospital on Marquam Hill would replace a hospital built in 1928, one year before the Great Crash on Wall Street and eight years after the start of Prohibition. Included in the bargain is a new outpatient clinic to be located in downtown Portland, perhaps at the site of Emanuel Hospital, and a new 120-bed long-term care facility constructed in Vancouver, Washington.

For the community of Portland, the payoff is retention of the VA Medical Center's 1,250-person payroll that totals \$23.7 million annually, plus another \$8 million spent by the hospital on medical supplies. Construction of the project, to span several years, will total \$176 million. That amount of construction will stimulate more than \$800 million of economic activity in the community during the next decade.

For the citizens of Oregon, the payoff is continuation of the unusually high degree of coordination between the VA Hospital and the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center. I am reminded of a comment made by Dr. Leonard Laster, president of Health Sciences Center, when he first came to Oregon. He said he was dumbfounded that people here had failed to grasp the importance of the link between the Medical School and the VA Hospital. A high level of coordination cuts costs at both the VA Hospital and the Medical School, and Oregon taxpayers get a break. Coordination also enhances medical training, especially in areas such as rehabilitation, psychiatry, emphysema and geriatrics. This pays direct dividends to all Oregonians as 65 out of every 100 physicians practicing in our state received all or part of their training at the VA Hospital.

Those are hefty payoffs. So why are some individuals preparing to fight a new 11th hour court fight against the hospital? It's because they say we can supply health care to veterans without building the hospital, through something called "mainstreaming," which would enable veterans to take their health care in community hospitals.

The selling point of mainstreaming is that the money

supposedly "saved" by not building a new hospital could be used instead to provide "better" medical care to veterans.

It's an interesting theory. But it is going to remain a theory for at least another decade, regardless what we in Portland decide about our VA Hospital. Advocating this approach is to make this progressive, savvy community suddenly the laughing-stock of the country as one community after another takes VA hospital funds that otherwise would be ours.

This is the case because there's one way and one way alone that VA health care is delivered to veterans - and that's through VA hospitals. To change that will take an act of Congress and a reversal of a half-century of national policy. Someday this might conceivably occur. But if it does, it will result from study and debate in the Executive Branch and in the people's Congress -- not in the streets of Portland.

It's a cruel delusion to lure Portlanders to believe that if the replacement VA Hospital isn't built, veterans will be shuffled off to vacant beds in existing local hospitals, and that somehow hospital costs won't grow higher, is a fabrication.

And, it's worse than a delusion to entice veterans to support mainstreaming with the promise they will be able to stay closer to home when they go to the hospital. It's a deception.

And what about this vaunted surplus of hospital beds in Portland? Some estimates run as high as 750 beds. However, further inspection reveals some of these beds are licensed, but do not really exist. Others are in facilities that are obsolete. Still others are in specialized wards not available to veterans. A more accurate estimate of overbedding in Portland is probably closer to 200 beds.

What will really happen if the VA Hospital is not built in Portland on Marquam Hill is one of two things:

-- VA medical facilities in Seattle will be reconstructed and enlarged and Oregon veterans will be sent there; or

-- Local veterans will continue to be consigned to the horrors of the existing VA facility.

If you haven't already visited the existing, run-down VA Hospital, do it now. I have. I've taken time to prowl the corridors, the wards, the nursing stations, the waiting rooms, the surgical areas. I've spent hours talking to doctors, nurses, and patients. And I'm always shaken at the conditions I find.

For example, the surgical department has the operating room on one floor, the nurses' and doctors' station on another and the intensive care unit on yet another. The elevator that connects these floors is old and creaky and sometimes doesn't work. In emergencies, when the elevator isn't working, medical personnel run up and down stairs. Can you imagine what goes on when a patient has to be carted up and down stairs?

As people with compassion, we cannot consign veterans to this kind of health care treatment, nor can we stand for sending our veterans to Seattle. But that is what will happen if we sit by and let members of our community who see this issue as a sexy new Mount Hood Freeway issue block construction of this hospital.

The thing to remember is that those who oppose construction of this hospital have to do very little to get their way. In fact, all they really have to do is pay their \$35, file a lawsuit, and get an injunction against construction until the suit is dispensed with. By the time the lawsuit is settled, let alone appealed, the Veterans Administration will have long since scrapped its plan for this replacement hospital in Portland.

And let's be clear on what this lawsuit would be all about. The backers of the lawsuit would claim that the environmental impact statement done by the Veterans Administration, the first one ever by the VA for a new hospital, is inadequate. Inadequate not because it failed to address the environmental issues pertinent to locating the replacement hospital on Marquam Hill or at an alternative site. But inadequate because it failed to address the question of changing the law to permit the Veterans Administration to send veterans to community hospitals.

Think about that. Think what kind of a precedent we are talking about. It would expand the purpose of environmental impact statements from examining relevant environmental issues to examining virtually any issue, environmental or otherwise. It would tell the Veterans Administration to stop constructing a hospital in Portland

until it considered other options -- other options that the VA, by law, cannot undertake now.

So the question squarely before us today is whether we want a Veterans Hospital to remain in Portland or not. The benefits of having it here are clear. The benefits of a new facility, from the vantage point of veterans, especially poor veterans who are not going to be welcome with wide open arms at already financially strapped community hospitals, is compelling. The stakes are immense.

And as I said at the very beginning of my remarks, we are at the point of no return.

After considerable wrangling and horse-trading, the House Appropriations subcommittee that oversees the VA's budget authorized a ceiling for the Portland hospital of \$176 million.

The VA, by scaling down its originally proposed 600-bed hospital and through other economies, says it still can build in Portland. But only if there are no more delays.

Even Congressman Bob Duncan, my colleague from the Congressional District across the river, a long-time advocate of locating the replacement VA Hospital at the Emanuel Hospital site, believes as I do that no more delays can be countenanced. We must move ahead. Nothing further is to be gained by standing still. I hope others in the community will follow his example.

If diehard members of our community do allow this project to die, no one will have to ask why it died, or who wielded the knife. The light will shine brightly on those with blood on their hands.

This is the challenge we face today in our community. The situation is desperate. We have squabbled and we have piddled. Now it is time to act.

I am appealing to you as leaders in our community to do all you can to prevent the unnecessary and unconscionable halting of construction of a new VA Hospital in Portland. We have everything to gain, and a lot to lose if you don't.