

TESTIMONY ON ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT
REPLACEMENT PORTLAND VETERANS HOSPITAL

By CONGRESSMAN LES AuCOIN
Portland, July 21

The issue of a replacement for the outdated 463-bed hospital on Marquam Hill in Portland that was constructed in 1928 has been up in the air for too long.

At issue never has been where to build the replacement hospital, but whether to back up the Veterans Administration's decision of where to build it. This environmental impact statement, in my view, removes any lingering doubts or obstacles for support of the VA's decision to build the replacement hospital at Marquam Hill.

Let me state my position with absolute clearness. The purpose of this environmental impact statement was to examine potential environmental problems associated with building at Marquam Hill, as the VA proposes, and at the same time to make the same examination of a rival site that has been proposed. This environmental impact statement removes all doubt, all question, that there are any significant environmental impediments to building a replacement VA hospital on Marquam Hill.

Frankly, the environmental impact statement says little that wasn't known previously. Studies since the early 1960s have repeatedly recommended building a replacement hospital at Marquam Hill. All the environmental impact statement has accomplished is to perpetuate a debate that has allowed the cost of the facility to rise unnecessarily -- no matter where it is built.

And that brings me to the central point. The decision of where to locate the replacement VA hospital should be -- and must be -- based principally on a concern of what's best in terms of health care for the veterans of our state and our region, which this hospital serves.

Under that principle, no objective observer can doubt that the place to build the replacement hospital is Marquam Hill, adjacent to the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center.

The environmental impact statement points out the extraordinary amount of coordination that exists now, and anticipates even greater ties with construction of a modern VA facility. I quote from the statement:

"The VA hospital has developed a close relationship with the adjacent University of Oregon Health Sciences Center over the past 25 years. The two institutions cooperate extensively in the major areas of medical care, education and research. The quality of staff and health care at the VAMC are believed to be higher because of this association, and the University benefits in a similar matter....Construction of a new VAMC would improve veteran health care due to the availability of the modern facilities of a new 600-bed hospital. At Marquam Hill, it is likely that the relationship with the Health Sciences Center would be enhanced and health care would be further improved."

This coordination is a product of proximity, and will only continue at current and future expanded levels if the VA hospital and the medical school are within walking distance. The statement says, "According to staff and key administrators at both institutions, the close ties have developed because of a short travel time (3 to 10 minutes) between them." You will hear testimony today that underscores that point beyond question.

Those who say that coordination can be maintained at present levels no matter where the replacement VA hospital is located just don't have their facts straight. According to the statement, "If (the replacement hospital is) constructed at Emanuel, new opportunities would be provided for cooperation with the staff of that hospital. It is unlikely, however, that the level of cooperation could be established which now exists at the Health Sciences Center. Continued sharing with the Health Sciences Center would also be difficult due to the distance between the two facilities, and it is believed that the amount of joint activities would gradually decrease. Thus, existing programs at the Health Sciences Center which are enhanced by the proximity of the VAMC would also be negatively affected."

The environmental impact statement makes an effort to quantify the value of this coordination if the replacement hospital is built somewhere other than Marquam Hill. The pricetag: \$2 million annually.

For me, that sum could be \$100,000 and I would still feel as strongly about the need for perpetuating the strong bonds between the VA hospital and the Health Sciences Center. Those bonds are priceless, because they mean an enhanced ability to save and to rehabilitate lives for Americans who have truly given their all to their country and deserve no less than the best health care treatment possible. And they also mean better

health care at a lower cost for all Oregonians. The VA hospital's proximity enhances medical education at the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center and reduces duplication and therefore costs. It's a bargain we shouldn't cast aside.

The environmental impact statement also makes what some have viewed as a startling estimate in the relative cost of building a replacement hospital at Marquam Hill versus starting anew with a hospital elsewhere. The statement says building at Marquam Hill actually is cheaper. Yes, cheaper.

I am not all that surprised at that estimate. Supporters of sites other than Marquam Hill have continually inflated costs on the hill and downplayed costs at their site.

But even if the cost estimates of the environmental impact statement are shown to be inaccurate, it can now be safely said that there isn't that much difference in capital construction costs to warrant basing a siting decision on this lone factor. Indeed, if cost considerations are to be a critical determinant, the cost we should isolate for analysis is relative operating cost, and on that score Marquam Hill, because of its coordination with the Health Sciences Center, comes out miles ahead.

I want to compliment the Veterans Administration and its Administrator Max Cleland for scrupulous fairness in the process of selecting a site for a replacement VA hospital in Portland. No one can assert they haven't had a chance to be heard on this issue, or that the facts haven't been reviewed. Now is the time to bring the review to an end, and make a decision.

Niggling over details will serve no constructive public purpose, except cause further delays and more expense for the taxpayer. The time has come to go forward. The environmental impact statement, as one tool in the decision-making process, is valuable because it allays any fears about building at Marquam Hill and directs attention to where it always should have been: A replacement hospital in Portland is not a public works project or a community redevelopment project; it is an investment in superior health care for veterans.