

The Honorable Wayne Allard, US Senator from Colorado

SENATE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
HEARING ON VA MAJOR CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS
THURSDAY, APRIL 6, 2006

Sen. Wayne Allard Opening Statement:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for giving me the opportunity to present before the committee on an issue of much importance to the veterans of Colorado. I strongly support replacing the current Denver VA medical center with a new facility at the former Fitzsimons Army Medical Center.

The Denver VA hospital was built more than fifty years ago and medical technology has far surpassed what the builders of the Denver VA originally envisioned. While I cannot say enough about the care and service our veterans receive at the current facility, many changes and improvements can and should be made, and a new facility is the only way to accomplish these goals.

The current construction plans present credible proof that a new Fitzsimons facility will increase healthcare quality and quantity for our veterans. It is my hope that a new hospital will also serve as a regional beacon for modern veteran medical care science through the VA's unique collaboration with the University of Colorado.

The Denver VA, the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center and the University of Colorado Hospital already have a complex and rewarding partnership in meeting veterans' healthcare needs in the region. The University of Colorado strongly supports the move of the existing Denver VA medical facility to the Fitzsimons Campus in Aurora, CO and looks forward to strengthening their partnership with the Veterans Administration, allowing each entity to focus on its strengths.

Of course, the biggest endorsement of this new facility comes ultimately from the end-users. The United Veterans Committee of Colorado, a coalition of 45 federally chartered veterans' service organizations, strongly supports the relocation of the Denver VA medical center to the Fitzsimons campus.

As you know, Mr. Chairman, at last week's Military Construction & Veterans Affairs Appropriations hearing with Secretary Nicholson, the Secretary stated that in order to move forward with the project an immediate need must be met. This need is acquiring the land on which the new medical facility would sit.

The VA has reached an agreement with the Fitzsimons Redevelopment Authority, the entity that manages the land at the former Fitzsimons Army Medical Center, on a site and a price but they need new authority to proceed with the purchase. I would also stress that while the VA has this agreement in place with the Fitzsimons Redevelopment Authority, the FRA is anxious to move ahead with the sale, and has set a deadline of August 2006 to finalize the contract for the desired site.

It is an important point that prior to the current site selection, the FRA had originally planned to use the land for hotel and retail space but now will use all proceeds from sale to acquire other property for these properties. As you can imagine, the FRA is rather anxious to move ahead with the sale as soon as possible.

Of course, in addition to the immediate authority for site purchase before this August deadline, a larger issue remains: that of the authority for the VA to move forward with the entire construction project. To that end, I have recently introduced legislation, S. 2547, which would accomplish both of these objectives.

Specifically, the language of bill S. 2547 authorizes the Secretary to carry out the entire project and provides authority to the VA purchase the land with current year dollars. An identical companion proposal was also introduced in the House by my colleague, Congressman Bob Beauprez, who has been a stalwart on this issue. I would like to specifically recognize Congressman Beauprez for his efforts and leadership on this project, which will impact not only his constituents but veterans in the entire Rocky Mountain region.

There was a time not too long ago that it looked like this project was in peril. Thankfully, early last year Secretary Nicholson brought a much-needed, fresh perspective to this project. He made it a priority and made it clear to the entire Colorado delegation that he would pursue every opportunity to make the project a reality, and I thank him for that.

In addition, finding a suitable site for the project was of utmost importance. Without the hard work and diligence of the Fitzsimons Redevelopment Authority and its chairman, City of Aurora Mayor Ed Tauer, an agreement would not have been reached.

Again, I thank you Chairman Craig, for the opportunity to speak here today. I would also like to recognize the strong support my colleague Senator Salazar has shown for this project. Without a bipartisan effort we would not be this close on realizing our goal. I look forward to working with the committee on my legislation and making this project a reality.