

LES AUCOIN
1ST DISTRICT, OREGON



CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515

STATEMENT ON PORTLAND VA FACILITY

March 18, 1977

I've asked you to join me this morning because I believe the local VA hospital issue is rapidly reaching the point of no return.

I have always hoped the decision on where to build the new hospital could be made solely by the health care professionals in the Veterans Administration. I believe they are more apt to know what's medically best for the veteran than is a congressman, or a senator, or a city councilman, or a mayor. I said from the beginning that I would support the decision of the medical experts -- even if that meant the hospital might be built outside my district.

I said this for the simple reason that VA hospitals ought to be built to give the highest possible quality care to the veteran. All other considerations are secondary.

The problem is that not everyone has seen fit to approach the issue this way.

The result is that a wide variety of factions are pulling at the VA's Marquam Hill proposal, trying to get a piece of the action -- or all of the action.

I question no one's motives, but I question the judgment of some. The people of this area have to understand that what we've got here is a political tug of war -- an effort to force the VA medical professionals to abandon their best judgment for other considerations.

If this is allowed to occur, the veterans of this area will be the losers. This is their hospital. Its only purpose is to serve them. I am convinced an overwhelming majority of Oregon veterans agree with the VA and want their hospital on Marquam Hill, next to the medical school.

But a more likely result is that if we can't stop all this political in-fighting, the VA may drop its plans and not build at all. There are half a dozen other communities in the country standing in line behind us just waiting for new VA hospitals!

This is the story that must get out. We're talking about what the professionals say is best for the veteran.

We're talking about what the veterans themselves want.

And finally, we're talking about whether political maneuvering will stop this project and deny the entire Portland area more than 1,600 jobs.

I want it to be known that I fully support the decision of the VA medical professionals to build its facility on Marquam Hill.

However, it seems clear to me that unless someone is prepared to budge, unless this political stalemate is broken, we may lose everything.

For this reason, I will formally recommend a compromise to the VA next week.

I will suggest that we return to the concept originally proposed several years ago by Senator Hatfield -- and that is a simple modern replacement facility for the existing acute care hospital on Marquam Hill.

Allowing for some leeway, this would result in a hospital of approximately the same size as the existing 527-bed facility.

I will further propose Barnes Hospital in Vancouver remain in full operation while the VA considers how it can best serve the long-term needs of this region's veterans.

And finally, I will suggest that the VA keep its ambulatory care facility in downtown Portland.

I think this proposal can overcome most political objections to the Marquam Hill site.

It takes nothing away from Vancouver, Washington. It scales down the size of the facility to a degree that will, when coupled with a new parking facility, reduce congestion on Marquam Hill.

It still protects the crucial minimum need for the veteran -- namely, having an acute care hospital in close proximity to a medical school.

It will also save the State of Oregon at least \$1 million of additional expenses for the medical school which would be incurred if the Veterans Hospital were moved away from the Hill.

Lastly, it protects a relationship between the VA facility and the medical school that has also enhanced medical education in Oregon.

I am aware that there are some powerful political forces aligned against the Marquam Hill site. And the plain fact is, this battle could be lost.

But if it is lost, the real losers will be the veterans of this region. And Portland itself could be a loser if the VA decides it has had its fill of local politics and drops the project.

It is for these reasons that I am making my recommendations to the VA and to the Congress.