

STATEMENT BY CONGRESSMAN LES AuCOIN
Before the Subcommittee on HUD-Independent Agencies
of the House Committee on Appropriations
April 5, 1977

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF THE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION PROPOSAL
FOR REPLACEMENT OF ITS PORTLAND/VANCOUVER HOSPITALS

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you and the members of your committee for this opportunity. I'm here to express my strong support for the plans of the Veterans Administration to replace the dreadfully outmoded Portland and Vancouver VA hospitals. The need for new facilities is obvious. But where to provide new facilities has stirred up a controversy I know you're intimately aware of. The new VA Administrator told me that the flap over the Portland hospital has taken more of his time than any other issue since he was sworn in. I know it's taken a good deal of your time, too. So I'd like to speak briefly -- but directly -- to the controversy. And I will try to clarify some of the contradictions that have emerged. And I'd like to urge the committee not to abandon the carefully considered judgement of the medical program professionals of the VA.

First, let me say there is no controversy on sitting in the minds of either the veterans or the Veterans Administration. The people the new hospital is meant to serve -- and those who provide that service -- clearly want the new hospital to stay on Marquam Hill, in Portland, within minutes of the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center. For more than two years, the United Veterans Groups of Oregon and all its member organizations (The American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, the Military Order of the Purple Heart, United Spanish War Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Veterans of World War I of the USA) have unanimously endorsed placing the new hospital on Marquam Hill. Since 1975, their joint position has stated: "It has been demonstrated, and proven, that the closer a VA Hospital is to an established, accredited Medical School, the greater will be the availability of highly qualified medical personnel and highly specialized procedures and facilities."

The Veterans Administration, in its own analysis of available locations in the Portland area, reached the same conclusion. Now, Mr. Chairman, your committee may hear testimony that in selecting a site on Marquam Hill, the VA overrode its own consultants. Let me lay that to rest right here. The facts are these: First, the study was made to help the VA evaluate various possible sites, but it was never intended

to represent the VA's decision on siting. Secondly -- The study was done by an architectural firm using a set of criteria weighted 75 per cent toward construction-related findings. Only 25 per cent weight was given to medical considerations. But Thirdly, -- the final, official conclusion of the consultants was, **nevertheless**, that the best site for the new hospital was a site on Marquam Hill, next to the medical school, where the current hospital is located.

Mr. Chairman, some have tried to picture Portland as a community divided over the VA's plan, or a community openly opposed to it. It's true that at the political level there's been some division, but for the community itself, there is no evidence of division. On the contrary, both of Portland's daily newspapers, The OREGONIAN and the OREGON JOURNAL, have strongly endorsed the VA's proposal. In fact, all the editorial opinion expressed in Oregon so far has been in favor of the VA's proposal.

As for the public's opinion, there's been only one public hearing held in Portland on this matter. At that hearing about two and one half weeks ago, 23 people spoke in favor of the VA's plan. Four witnesses supported the Emanuel site, three spoke for other sites and two witnesses proposed other alternatives.

Last week, a three-day poll by a local doctor produced a petition signed by 128 physicians in private practice in Portland. They all supported the VA's plan.

The Oregon State Board of Higher Education endorses the VA position.

Oregon Governor Bob Straub also endorses the VA's plan. He's asked me to convey his support to you today, and his letter of endorsement is attached to the testimony I've submitted. Also, Mr. Chairman, former Congresswoman Edith Green also supports the VA plan. I have a letter from her to this Committee which I'd like to submit for the record.

Now, Mr. Chairman, let's get into the facts.

Opponents of the VA's plan have said the Marquam Hill neighborhood opposes building the new hospital on the Hill. On the contrary, the Homestead Neighborhood Association is committed to supporting and working with the VA on the construction of a new Hospital next to the Medical School. I quote from the Association's most recent letter to the VA: "The neighborhood as a whole is supportive of the Veterans Administration in its efforts to provide needed medical services to the

veteran, and recognizes such care will be enhanced by co-locating veterans medical facilities as much as possible with the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center." In that letter, the group raised a concern about the VA's plan to consolidate all its outpatient services in the new hospital because of the potential increase in traffic. In response to that concern, the VA changed its plan and decided to leave a satellite outpatient clinic in downtown Portland, I point this out to illustrate the close cooperation and sensitivity the Veterans Administration has already shown with the neighborhood. The Chief Medical Director of the Veterans Administration, Dr. Jack Chase, travelled to Oregon last year specifically to meet with the Homestead Neighborhood Association and establish this kind of direct communication.

Mr. Chairman, I want to emphasize my support for the VA's plan now before your Committee. I respectfully urge your Committee to approve it as presented by the Veterans Administration. But should this Committee decide to look at alternatives, let me suggest one that I believe protects the most vital element of top quality medical care for the veteran. As an alternative, I would suggest that Barnes Hospital in Vancouver remain in full operation, that the VA build a simple replacement hospital on Marquam Hill roughly comparable in size to the current 527-bed facility, and that the VA continue its plans to keep its ambulatory care outpatient facility in downtown Portland. Such a plan would protect the essential ingredient which results in the best possible medical care for our veterans -- namely, the closest possible proximity to between acute care hospitals and medical schools.

Mr. Chairman, in all debate on siting, challenges to locating the new hospital on Marquam Hill have never seemed to be based on medical concerns. Supporters of other sites point out their location's ease of accessibility. They talk about the need for economic stimulation in their area. They say site preparation costs will be lower, or the support of their neighborhood is superior. These are all considerations worthy of discussing, but they beg the question. And the question is this: "What do they offer to the quality of health care provided the veteran that is superior to what the VA now enjoys because of its close relationship with the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center?" That's the essential question and it's never been answered.

I believe that moving the VA hospital away from Marquam Hill will limit and restrict the current cooperative arrangements between the VA and the Medical School. And I believe that means a diminished quality of the medical care for the veteran. More than twenty-five years of VA experience backs this up.

Mr. Chairman, with me this morning is Dr. Lewis W. Bluemle, President of the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center. I've asked him to tell this committee what the VA now enjoys because of its relationship with the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center -- and what veterans stand to lose by moving off Marquam Hill.

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Again, Mr. Chairman, I wish to thank the Committee for allowing me this opportunity to testify, and I urge the Committee to approve the VA's plan for the hospital.
