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New veterans home plan picks up steam

Story by: Curt Kipp

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One-stop services for veterans. That's the dream of Rick and Elizabeth Peters of Wilsonville. The couple would like to build a first-of-its-kind, 51-acre campus to serve Oregon's 366,000 living veterans. It would be located on currently-rural land just north of Mercedes of Wilsonville. The proposed Oregon Veterans Center could feature a 300-bed veterans home with assisted living and dementia care, an outpatient clinic, a claims office, an auditorium, a mental health clinic, fitness facilities and more, all in one place. The process of getting all that done, however – if in fact it happens – will be anything but one-stop. One of the first steps happened last week, when the Oregon House Veterans Affairs Committee unanimously approved House Bill 3009. This bill would direct the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs to create a new veterans home, which would be the second in the state. After decades of unsuccessful attempts, the first such home was opened in 1997 in The Dalles with 151 beds. Veterans groups point out that other states of Oregon's size, or smaller, have several such facilities. The bill does not say where the new home would be located, but according to the couple, the ideal location is on their proposed campus, because it is on the I-5 corridor between Portland and Salem. "Wilsonville is one area that certainly has support due to its proximity to half the veterans in the state," said Rick Peters, president of the Oregon Veterans Foundation, which he and his wife formed. The home would be funded by federal money as well as private donations. A public contribution in the form of a bond issue is also a possibility; the home in The Dalles was built with a local match from a countywide bond measure there, which voters approved.

CERTIFICATE OF NEED?

The bill, chiefly sponsored by Rep. Jerry Krummel (R-Wilsonville), would also exempt the new home from the state's certificate of need requirement for all new veterans homes. "This reduces one hurdle, so if the Department of Veterans eventually decides to put a veterans home in the Portland area ... not having the certificate of need requirement is a help," he said. On that point, the bill did encounter some resistance at last week's hearing. "Certificate of need was established to ensure that any new facilities are needed and financially viable," said Mary Gear, an

administrator for the state Department of Human Services. "Whether or not a facility is financially viable significantly impacts the quality of care that that facility can provide." Gear heads up the DHS Office of Licensing and Quality of Care, Seniors and People with Disabilities. She testified that the veterans home constructed in The Dalles was exempted from the certificate of need process, and that's a mistake she wouldn't want to repeat. "We believe that process may have helped alleviate some of the things that may have needed to be addressed further down the road in the history of that facility," she said. Mac McDonald, president of the United Veterans of Oregon, testified that the home in The Dalles has maintained a high quality of care. "If we need a certificate of need, the earliest we could get a (new) veterans home in this state is 2012," he said. "The process is not needed. We've met every requirement of the certificate of need excellently with the veterans home that we currently have. A second veterans home is needed and financially able to provide the service that Oregon veterans deserve and require." Rick Peters testified that the Oregon Veterans Foundation would be taking no position for now on the certificate of need. He said that matter is "best left to the experts." But Jim Willis, director of the state Department of Veterans Affairs, said any new home would need buy-in anyway from the Veterans Administration, veterans groups, an operator, and a governor's advisory committee. That would ensure that the new home, if built, would be successful, he said. Committee member Rep. Mike Schaufler, D-Happy Valley, said he was sold on the proposal. "You can't just be throwing stuff up willy nilly and let another go unserved, but the population of veterans in this state (is huge)," he said. "We talked about 151 beds, and we have hundreds of thousands of veterans in this state. I don't have to be an expert to know we need more (beds)." Schaufler said the state could probably use three more veterans homes in Wilsonville, Ontario and Medford. "Maine has six, and they're busy, they're full," said Rep. Brian Boquist, R-Dallas, another committee member. The proposed campus and veterans home is just the latest effort to honor and support veterans by Rick and Elizabeth Peters. A few years back they organized a concert in Newberg to honor veterans. More recently, Rick purchased a double dump truck and had it painted as a rolling tribute to veterans, and also helps publicize the veterans center effort. Rick Peters said he was pleased with the committee's support. "We know this is a non-partisan issue," he said. "Everyone wants to be in support of the veterans. We'll just keep pushing forward."

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