

ROBERT STEVENSON

WALLA WALLA

(H)

CARES TESTIMONY

IN MY ALLOTTED TIME I WOULD LIKE TO ADDRESS TWO ISSUES RELATIVE TO THIS FACILITY THAT ARE OF IMPORTANCE TO VETERANS AND NON-VETERANS ALIKE. FIRST, THERE IS THE MATTER OF THE HISTORIC SITE. FORT WALLA WALLA WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1857 AT WHAT IS NOW THE INTERSECTION OF FIRST AND MAIN STREETS IN THE HEART OF DOWNTOWN WALLA WALLA. THE FOLLOWING YEAR IT WAS RELOCATED TO THE PRESENT SITE, NOW HOME TO THIS DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS MEDICAL CENTER.

THE PRESENCE OF THE FORT PROVIDED THE CORNERSTONE FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF A THRIVING COMMUNITY THAT HAS BEEN A SEAT OF GOVERNMENT AND KEYSTONE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST. FIFTEEN HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT FORT-ERA STRUCTURES ARE STILL ON THE GROUNDS, AND IN USE BY THE CURRENT OCCUPANT. THESE INCLUDE FIVE OF WHAT ARE PROBABLY THE OLDEST BUILDINGS IN WALLA WALLA, OFFICER'S QUARTERS CONSTRUCTED IN 1858. FOUR OF THESE HAVE HAND-MADE ADOBE BRICK CORES THAT WERE LATER COVERED BY THE PRESENT SHIPLAP SIDING. OTHER HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT STRUCTURES INCLUDE THE COMMANDING OFFICER'S QUARTERS BUILT IN 1877, TWO

OFFICERS' QUARTERS BUILT IN 1888, TWO BRICK BARRACKS BUILT IN 1906, AND SEVERAL OUTBUILDINGS USED BY THE FORT AS A GRANERY, STABLE, MAGAZINE, OILHOUSE, AND ORDINANCE STOREHOUSE. MOST OF THESE BUILDINGS, INCLUDING THE OFFICERS QUARTERS, WERE RECOMMENDED FOR DEMOLITION WHEN THE VA TOOK POSSESSION OF THE FORT PROPERTY. FORTUNATELY THIS WAS NOT IMPLEMENTED, AND THE BUILDINGS HAVE BEEN IN CONTINUOUS USE BY THE VA SINCE 1922.

DURING THE FORT'S EXISTANCE, NUMEROUS FAMILIAR NAMES SAW SERVICE HERE, INCLUDING STEPTOE, DENT (THE BROTHER-IN-LAW OF U.S. GRANT), RIDGEWAY, AND WAINWRIGHT. ROBERT POWELL PAIGE WAINWRIGHT'S SON, JONATHAN MAYHEW WAINWRIGHT, WW II DEFENDER OF THE PHILLIPINES AND HERO OF CORREGIDOR, WAS BORN AT THE FORT AUGUST 23, 1883 WHILE HIS FATHER WAS STATIONED HERE.

FORT WALLA WALLA WAS PERMANENTLY CLOSED SEPTEMBER 28, 1910, AND TRANSFERRED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR. THE SITE REMAINED RELATIVELY INACTIVE, BEING USED TO MUSTER IN TWO FIELD ARTILLERY BRIGADES DURING WW I AND BY A LOCAL HOSPITAL UNTIL THEIRS THAT HAD BURNED COULD BE REBUILT. THE RESERVATION WAS TRANSFERRED TO THE BUREAU OF PUBLIC HEALTH FOR USE IN PROVIDING HEALTHCARE TO VETERANS IN 1920.

THE FOLLOWING YEAR CONGRESS ESTABLISHED THE UNITED STATES VETERANS' BUREAU, AT WHICH TIME THE FORMER FORT SITE WAS TRANSFERRED TO THAT NEWLY CREATED BODY AS A VA HEALTHCARE FACILITY. IT HAS CONTINUED IN THAT CAPACITY TO THE PRESENT. THE RESERVATION, TOGETHER WITH THE REMAINING FORT-ERA BUILDINGS, WAS PLACED ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES ON APRIL 16, 1974.

A SECOND, AND MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE IS THAT OF VETERANS HEALTHCARE.

THE SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE WALLA WALLA VA MEDICAL CENTER HAVE BEEN MANY AND VARIED OVER THE YEARS; IT HAS SERVED AS A 500-BED TUBERCULOSIS SANITORIUM, A 150-BED GENERAL MEDICAL SURGICAL HOSPITAL, HAS PROVIDED NURSING HOME CARE, TREATMENT FOR SUBSTANCE ABUSE, INPATIENT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES, AND IN ITS PRESENT CONFIGURATION OF PROVIDING INPATIENT AND AMBULATORY SERVICES. THIS REPRESENTS THE CONTINUOUS AVAILABILITY OF HEALTHCARE SERVICES FOR VETERANS IN WALLA WALLA AND THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES SINCE CREATION OF THE ORIGINAL VETERANS BUREAU 82 YEARS AGO.

VETERANS HAVE MORE RECENTLY BEEN ASSURED, THROUGH THE MILLINIUM ACT, THAT HEALTHCARE SERVICES WILL BE AVAILABLE IN, OR WITHIN A REASONABLE COMMUTING DISTANCE, OF THEIR HOMES. DISCONTINUING HEALTHCARE SERVICES IN WALLA WALLA,

WITHOUT ADEQUATE PLANNING FOR ITS CONTINUED LOCAL AVAILABILITY, WILL POSE A HARDSHIP FOR MANY VETERANS, A LARGE NUMBER OF WHOM ARE ELDERLY. THE NEAREST FACILITY, SPOKANE, IS A 2&1/2 HOUR DRIVE OVER HAZARDOUS ROADS IN WINTER WEATHER. I CAN PERSONALLY ATTEST TO THAT, HAVING SKIDDED ON ICE IN THAT AREA LAST YEAR AND DOING CONSIDERABLE DAMAGE TO MY VEHICLE. MANY VETERANS ALREADY DRIVE THAT GREAT A DISTANCE, OR FURTHER, FROM OUTLYING AREAS SUCH AS LAGRANDE AND BAKER, OREGON TO ACCESS HEALTHCARE IN WALLA WALLA; DISCONTINUING ANY SERVICES HERE WILL ONLY CAUSE THOSE VETERANS ADDITIONAL TRAVEL TIME. ELDERLY VETERANS ARE DOUBLY CONSTRAINED BY THE CHALLENGES OF FAILING HEALTH AND LIMITED RESOURCES FOR EXTENSIVE TRAVEL, RESULTING IN MANY, OTHERWISE ELEGIBLE VETERANS, NOT ACCESSING ANY HEALTHCARE SERVICES, OR DOING SO ONLY WHEN THEY HAVE REACHED A CRITICAL CONDITION THAT IS MORE DIFFICULT OR BEYOND MEDICAL ABILITY TO TREAT. HAVING RETIRED WITH 21 YEARS OF SERVICE AT THIS FACILITY, AND AS A VETERAN SERVED BY THIS MEDICAL CENTER, I GREATLY APPRECIATE THE NEED FOR BOTH FISCAL EFFICIENCY AND MEDICAL EFFICACY IN THE PROVISION OF HEALTHCARE. THIS WAS DEMONSTRATED SEVERAL YEARS AGO WHEN SURGICAL SERVICES WERE DISCONTINUED AT WALLA WALLA DUE TO LOW DEMAND AND HIGH COST. AS A RESULT, MANY VETERANS IN NEED

OF SURGICAL PROCEDURES WAITED MONTHS FOR THIS SERVICE TO BE PROVIDED BY ALREADY OVERBURDENED VA FACILITIES HUNDREDS OF MILES FROM THEIR HOMES. EVEN THOUGH THE VETERAN POPULATION IS PROJECTED TO DECREASE OVER THE COMING YEARS, MORE VETERANS ARE EXPECTED TO SEEK VA HEALTHCARE SERVICES DURING THAT SAME PERIOD. DISCONTINING ANY SERVICE NOW BEING PROVIDED, WITHOUT ADEQUATELY PROVIDING FOR ITS REPLACEMENT, WILL BE A DISSERVICE TO THOSE WHO HAVE SO WILLINGLY SERVED THEIR NATION. I TRUST THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS WILL BE ABLE TO BALANCE THE HEALTHCARE NEEDS OF OUR VETERANS NOW BEING WELL SERVED BY THE WALLA WALLA VA MEDICAL CENTER, WITH THE NEED FOR FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY AND PROVIDER PROFICIENCY.

THANK YOU FOR THIS OPPORTUNITY TO PRESENT TESTIMONY TO THE COMMISION.

ROBERT L. STEVENSON

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**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
CARES COMMISSION**

**Johnathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center
Walla Walla, WA**

Chairman Alvarez, Commissioner McCurdy, Commissioner Ferguson and Commissioner Colley, thank you all for your service to our country and of course the service you are providing now. Welcome to Walla Walla.

My name is Larry Adams. I manage the Walla Walla Regional Airport for the Port of Walla Walla, and of course the public. I retired from the Marine Corps in 1982 after serving 21 years active duty that included tours in Vietnam, 1965 and 1966 and 1969, flying helicopters and bird dogs in I Corps. I utilize the excellent services provided by this facility.

I am sure that you know, when anyone starts tinkering with their VA benefits, and access and delivery of those entitlements, Veterans and their families get a little defensive and suspicious. They have been promised so much for so long and even though the intentions were honorable, most never make it through the legislative process.

In my opinion what CARES is doing is to preserve what we have and actually increase accessibility. Others may differ with those thoughts.

What I would really like to comment on, is that with the proposed changes, it is possible that some of the Federal VA facilities may be “shed” to the community.

My concern is based upon an experience that the Port of Walla Walla suffered through for more than 10 years, with the Walla Walla District Corps of Engineers moving from airport facilities to their new building downtown.

Shortly after the end of WWII, the Walla Walla Army Airbase, which was constructed in 1942, was surplused to the City and County of Walla Walla. In 1949 the federal government recaptured the old base hospital complex for use by the Corps of Engineers. They remained there for 46 years, extracting all usefulness out of the complex and leaving 10-15 years of deferred maintenance on the 33 building, 139,000 square foot facility.

In 1995 the complex was transferred back to the Port of Walla Walla, along with \$4.67 million in asbestos and lead paint liability.

It took 10 years and thousands of public dollars to finally convince the federal government it had a moral obligation in the matter.

Finally, the project was funded and complete demolition was started the spring of 2000, and finished later that summer.

The reason I bring this up is that with any of the VA buildings “shed” to our community, we would likely have significant maintenance, modernization and historical restoration and preservation costs, which would place a huge financial burden upon our citizens. The city and county presently are not in a financial position to solely fund this likelihood. A federal and local government partnership program should be considered to significantly reduce any burden to our citizens.

Thank you for allowing me to comment today.