

News

VA FACILITY COMING TO FRENCH CAMP

By **Zachary K. Johnson**

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Record Staff Writer

STOCKTON - A new medical facility for veterans is on its way to French Camp, bringing services closer to the veterans in and around San Joaquin County who for years have had to travel as far away as Palo Alto for care, Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Pleasanton, announced Wednesday.

The long-awaited news puts to rest years of anticipation of a decision from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs on where to place a \$280 million facility for the region, which includes a 120-bed nursing home and a 165,000-square-foot outpatient clinic with expanded services. Different counties in the region vied for the facility before San Joaquin County got the nod two years ago. For the past year, the competition has focused on two sites, one in Stockton and one in French Camp. The competing sites had divided local elected officials.

And since the VA began its national review of medical facilities a decade ago, county veterans have been pushing to keep health care services close to where veterans live.

"It took a long time of: Hurry up and wait," said Tino Adame, recent commander of Stockton's American Legion Karl Ross Post 16, and now vice commander for the region. For some of the thousands of veterans in the San Joaquin Valley, it means that the long drives to Palo Alto or Livermore for health care can end soon, he said. For veterans who are aging or had been wounded, that's a difficult ride, he said. "That's a long haul for a lot of veterans," he said.

Both the clinic and the nursing home will take the traveling burden away from veterans' families, too, McNerney said.

He has pushed for a San Joaquin County location since first elected to office in 2006. It's been a long, frustrating wait, but his office was celebrating the news, he said. "It's really going to serve the veterans very well."

He also noted the construction and staffing of the facility would create an estimated 900 jobs.

That would include 350 jobs once the projects are completed and the facility is up and running, as early as 2015-16, though the time line depends on the availability of funding, according to an environmental report released earlier this year.

The facility would add to those already operating in the Central Valley area of the Veterans Administration Palo Alto Health Care System, which is home to about 200,000 veterans in part of Alameda and all of San Joaquin, Calaveras, Tuolumne and Stanislaus counties.

The proximity to Interstate 5 had been a selling point to backers of a French Camp location since county government officials began pushing in 2005 for a spot next to San Joaquin General Hospital. In 2009, the VA decided the facilities would be in San Joaquin County, but it eventually turned down county government's proposal. What remained were two competing proposals from developers - one at University Park in central Stockton from the Grupe Commercial Co. and another in French Camp, just north of San Joaquin General, in unincorporated San Joaquin County. That was proposed by Holman Investors.

Whether the French Camp site would be able to hook up to city water and sewer had supporters of the French Camp proposal nervous. The question put city and county officials at odds, which is not uncommon in issues involving water, sewer and development. In March, the city promised to provide the utilities to the French Camp site if it was chosen by the VA.

"Now we have to work as quickly as we can to pool our efforts to complete the project," San Joaquin County Supervisor Steve Bestolarides said.

The new facility is a good thing for the city and the county, Supervisor Leroy Ornellas said. "Most important, it's a win for the veterans."

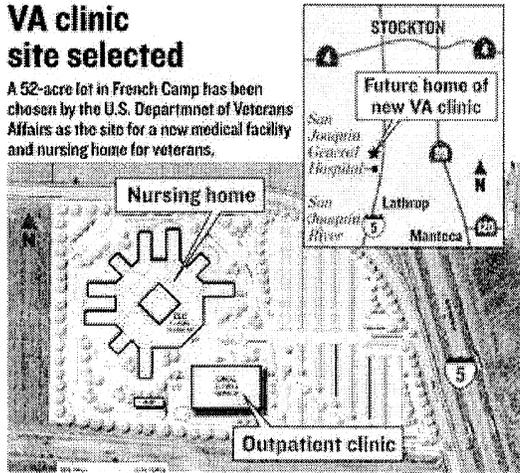
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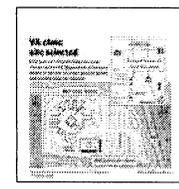


VA clinic site selected

A 52-acre lot in French Camp has been chosen by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs as the site for a new medical facility and nursing home for veterans.



Sources: Environmental Science Associates; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. RICK HODGCK/The Record



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