

Veterans' home is essential

Editorial

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By LeRoy Collins Jr., executive director, Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs
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The state of Florida is committed to building a state-of-the-art veterans' nursing home in St. Johns County.

In July 2005, the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs announced that due to the state's considerable veterans' population, and the need for additional long-term care, a 120-bed veterans' nursing home would be constructed in Northeast Florida, with approximately half the beds devoted to residents suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia. The site selection process was based upon need and was limited to six counties in Northeast Florida, including St. Johns.

On Jan. 31, 2006, Gov. Jeb Bush and the Florida Cabinet approved the St. Johns application, with a donated 15-acre site west of Interstate 95 on Florida 16.

St. Johns County is home to more than 17,500 veterans. This veterans' home will provide some relief for those in Northeast Florida most in need, while providing local employment opportunities for more than 140 people.

It will be operated by the state Veterans' Homes Program and will be constructed in partnership with the U.S. government.

The state of Florida will provide 35 percent of the funding, while the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs will pay the remaining 65 percent.

However, the VA notified the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs in December 2006 that, due to budget constraints, it did not receive federal funding this federal fiscal year for the St. Johns County home. In addition, new nursing home guidelines required resident rooms be single occupancy.

In order to meet these new specifications, Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs would increase the size of the nursing home by 26,000 square feet. A compromise was needed for funding, design and timely fulfillment.

To help us construct the new facility within the boundaries of the site chosen for the home, we are working with VA officials on accommodation, which will allow us a mix of single and double rooms.

Knowing that the proposed facility would require additional state funding to cover the increased size of the home, Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs worked with the Florida Legislature during the 2007 legislative session to secure an additional \$4.4 million to cover the state's new 35 percent target of the total cost of the home.

We have every reason to believe the VA will approve the room compromise and fully fund 65 percent of the costs in the next fiscal year beginning Oct. 1, allowing construction to begin in 2008.

I look forward to the ground- breaking ceremony in St. Johns County next year.