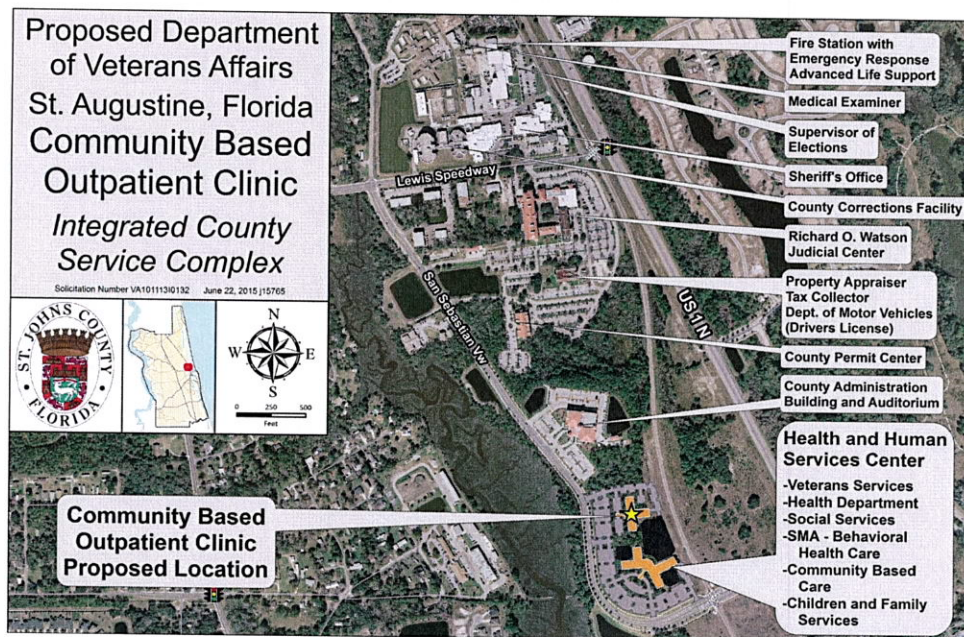


Remarks to the
**Subcommittee on National Security of the
House Committee on Oversight and Government Affairs**
On the subject of
“A Review of Veterans Affairs Major Lease Procurement”

By **Jerry Cameron**
Assistant County Administrator, St. Johns County, FL
June 25, 2015

Chairman DeSantis, Ranking Member Lynch, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is a privilege to address you today on a subject as important as the welfare of the veterans of our armed forces, who have so honorably served this nation in wars and military conflicts for well over a half century. Northeast Florida has a long history of supporting causes which benefit our veteran population, and nowhere have those efforts been stronger than in St. Johns County.

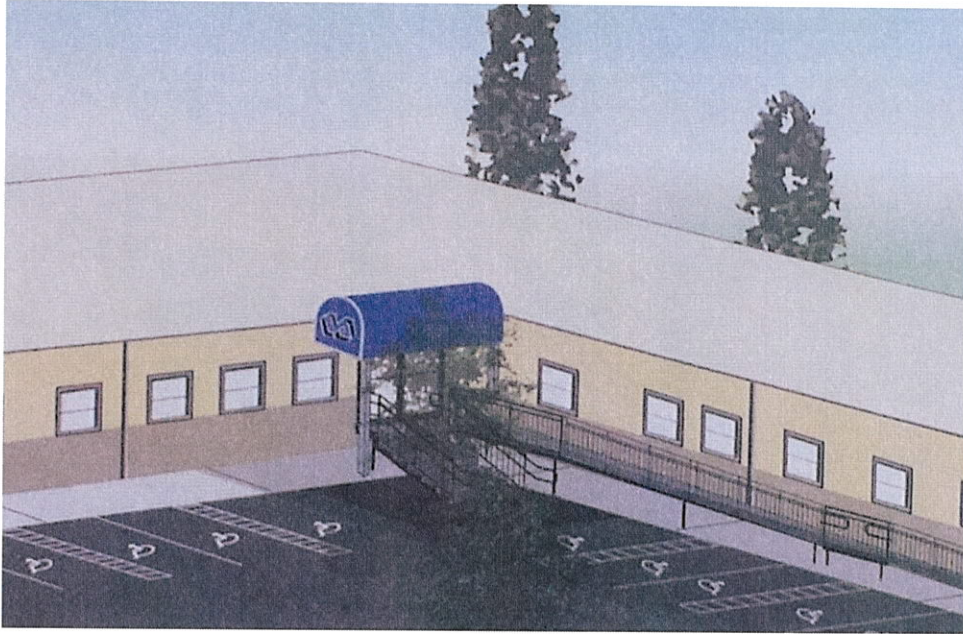
The governing body in our county believes it is not just the Federal Government that has the responsibility of coming to the aid and assistance of those who have served this country, but that this responsibility extends to every level of government, and indeed to each citizen. To this end, the St. Johns County Board of County Commissioners has established and funds a robust, local Veterans Service Office. Our Veterans Service Office is consistently recognized as one of the finest in the State of Florida, recently winning the distinguished “Service Office of the Year Award” presented by the Veterans of Foreign Wars.



Up until this spring, our veterans enjoyed having this office located directly beside the VA's Community Based Outpatient Clinic or CBOC, where they received assistance in filing for benefits and appeals, as well as many other services. In addition, at the same site veterans had access to many other resources through our Division of Health and Human Services such as; food stamps, temporary assistance to needy families, affordable housing, credit counseling and credit repair, resume development, use of computers for job search and communication, and a host of other services.

This ideal arrangement ended this spring when the VA refused to join the other service providers and move the CBOC to a new state-of-the-art facility built by St. Johns County to replace the existing structure, which was forty years old and in a state of disrepair. Almost four years ago, in October of 2011, St. Johns County first notified the VA regional office in Gainesville there was the potential for a sale of the existing Health and Human Services Facility to Lowes for a Home Improvement Center. The VA was kept informed as the County entered into a contract with Lowes which ultimately closed in March of 2013, at which time the VA was notified that the premises must be vacated no later than March 31, 2015. The County and the local veteran population were very concerned when the VA indicated, as early as 2011; they would not be relocating with the rest of the agencies to the new Health and Human Services building.

Time does not permit detailing the excruciating process of trying to reach a happy outcome for our veterans, but I have included in your packages a sketch of the time and all of the frustrations of trying to deal with the VA on this issue. It became obvious in early 2014, that the VA was not going to meet the March 31, 2015 vacation deadline, and there would either be an interruption of clinical services to our veterans or a delay in construction of the new Lowes store, a crucial economic development and job producing project. By the summer of 2014, the County became so alarmed that they offered to build a separate clinic at the new site, and at one point even offered to relocate their own agencies so the VA could use the space. The VA steadfastly refused to enter into meaningful discussions or to take initiative on their own to avoid the eminent crisis. When the vacation date arrived, the VA had no viable options. In order to avoid interruption of services, it fell on St. Johns County to negotiate an extension with Lowes and devise a plan to keep the old building operational. Including penalties and increased costs for operations, the VA's monthly facility related overhead went from approximately \$26,000 a month to approximately \$90,000, and will increase to approximately \$135,000 a month on October 1, 2015.

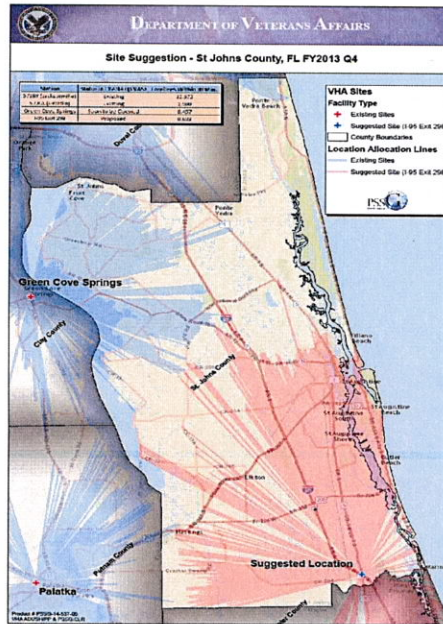


In addition, taxpayers will now have to pay for site preparation and these modular units to house a temporary clinic.

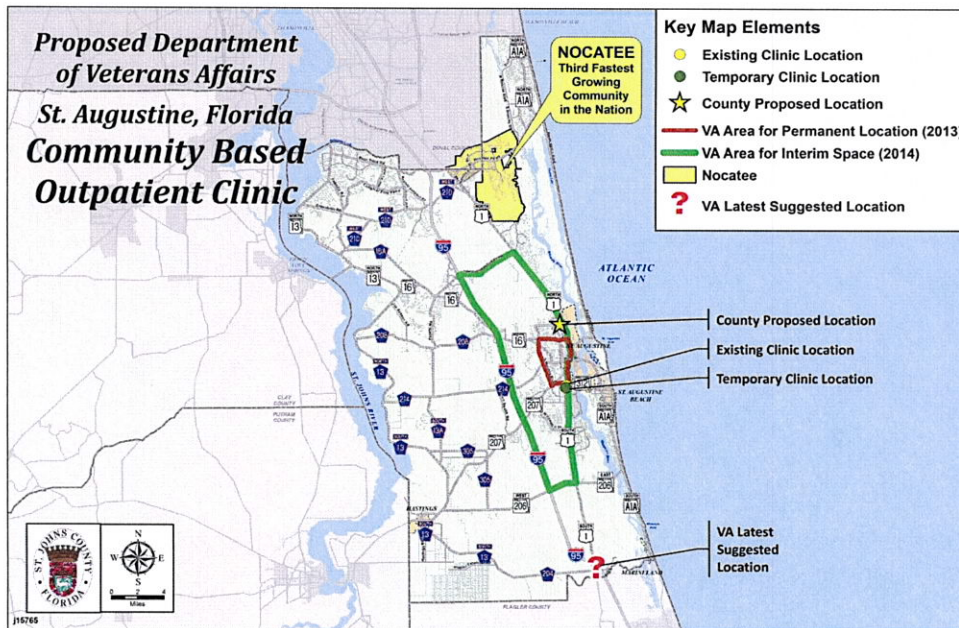


This is the new Health and Human Services building which was built within budget and completed on time. The VA clinic would have been operating out of here today had they not steadfastly refused any meaningful dialogue with St. Johns County or any attempt at cooperation to achieve the best outcome for our veterans.

The concern now is the VA is still exhibiting the same behavior that led us to this juncture. It is the fear of the County and the veteran-community that the VA will make a serious error in selecting a site for the permanent clinic. The VA has put out at least three different search area boundary maps.



One scenario places the proposed clinic as far south as the southern county line.



To date they have refused to consider population growth patterns. The northern portion of the county is exploding, with the New Town of Nocatee being the third fastest growing community in the nation.

It is critical that the VA to make a mistake in selecting the permanent site that the veterans of our county will have to live with for decades to come. St. Johns County is still willing to provide what has always been the VA's best option, an opportunity to locate with other essential service providers in a central location within the County.

In short, St. Johns County has become the classic example of the overall problems plaguing the VA throughout the Country. The VA is so insular that it has not only lost touch with those it is intended to serve, but it has lost connection and accountability to the Congress that created it. As an over-mature bureaucracy, it suffers a policy sclerosis that denies it situational flexibility to allow best outcomes in dynamic or atypical circumstances. Its focus is now on what is best for the bureaucracy and not what is best for the veterans it serves. The VA must once again become responsive to Congress and return its focus, first and foremost, to the welfare of the men and women who have served in our armed forces.

I thank you again for the unique opportunity to appear before you, and am confident that this proceeding is an important step towards finding solutions to this nationwide problem. I would be pleased to answer any questions.