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Bill would fund Hampton Roads veterans care center

By Bill Sizemore
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State lawmakers' loss may turn out to be military veterans' gain.

After Gov. Terry McAuliffe refused to proceed with a \$300 million Capitol Square legislative office building coveted by General Assembly leaders, a bill has been introduced earmarking part of that funding for a new veterans health care center in Hampton Roads.

The center would specialize in long-term care for veterans, similar to a nursing home, and would be operated by the Virginia Department of Veterans Services using pass-through federal money. It would be intended to supplement the Hampton VA Medical Center, which is operated by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

The project has been on the drawing board for years but has stalled because of a lack of federal money. Care centers are funded 65 percent by the federal government and 35 percent by the state.

There are two such centers in Virginia: one in Richmond near the Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center, and one in Roanoke near the Salem VA Medical Center.

Legislation to fund the state share of a Hampton Roads care center was introduced Monday - the first day bills could be pre-filed for the 2015 Assembly session - by House Majority Leader Kirk Cox, R-Colonial Heights.

The bill (HB1275) dedicates \$28.5 million in Virginia Public Bonding Authority bonds for the project. A companion bill (HB1276) earmarks the same amount for a care center in Northern Virginia.

The funds would come out of a \$300 million pot of money inserted by lawmakers in the fiscal 2014 state budget for a new legislative office building and parking garage to replace the aging General Assembly Building on Capitol Square.

McAuliffe, a Democrat, battled the Republican-controlled Assembly this year over budgetary issues - principally his proposal to expand the Medicaid health insurance program under the federal Affordable Care Act. Last month, he ordered state agencies to suspend work on the planned office building, saying that adding expensive facilities for lawmakers would send the wrong signal to taxpayers in a time of fiscal constraint.

"There are significant health and life-safety issues with the current General Assembly building that need to be addressed," Cox said in a statement Monday. "That is why both Republicans and Democrats in the General Assembly authorized funding to improve the capitol complex infrastructure.... However, because it is clear that Governor McAuliffe has no intention to move forward on this critical project, we have decided to prioritize the construction of two new veterans care centers using part of this funding."

Virginia is home to more than 800,000 veterans but ranks 44th among states in the ratio of veterans to available care centers, House leaders say.

Construction of the proposed centers is by no means assured, because acquiring the federal share of the funding has become increasingly difficult, according to Del. Chris Stolle, R-Virginia Beach, who will be lead co-patron of the legislation.

"Before they fund new construction, their money goes to maintenance," Stolle said. "And the maintenance of the current facilities is eating up a major portion of their budget."

The hope is that dedicating a source of money for the state share will help shake the federal funds loose. Failing that, Stolle said, the state might decide to downsize the planned centers and fund them on its own.

No site has been selected for a Hampton Roads care center, Stolle said, but it should be reasonably close to the Hampton VA center.

"If you look at where the heaviest veteran population centers are, it's Hampton Roads and Northern Virginia," he said. "So trying to get facilities in those two places is really important."

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