

Testimony of
Andrew J. Spano, Westchester County Executive
Before the U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs Regarding the Hudson Valley
Health Care System, Montrose, NY Campus
July 29, 2008

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at today's public hearing about this most important issue – the future of the VA Hudson Valley Health Care System's Montrose Campus. For decades, this property has played a critical role in providing care to veterans and I am here to urge you to ensure that whatever development occurs on the site remains focused on veterans and their families.

Keep in mind that this site was originally Westchester County-owned parkland. The county is not in the habit of selling off its parks. In fact, this has happened very rarely in our history. The *only* reason this land was deeded to the VA was because it was to be used for the most worthy of public purposes: the care of veterans. The site was sold specifically for use as a veterans' hospital complex immediately after World War II. While many things have changed over the years, our interest in this property has not. We still want it focused on veterans needs and improving the quality of life for veterans and their families.

Over the years, we have consistently fought against the elimination of services on the Montrose campus. The VA has rightly recognized that the property has been underutilized and is taking steps toward redevelopment. However this process has already gone on too long. While services are being reduced, the demand continues to increase. Our older veterans have needs that have gone un-met for decades. Our country is at war and more of our younger service members are returning home needing assistance. We need a resolution that accommodates older veterans as well as younger ones and their families – and we need to ensure a speedy process.

The Montrose campus is a beautiful and valuable piece of property that will no doubt be very enticing to many developers. However, the veterans who have attended meetings throughout the CARES process over the past several years have repeatedly conveyed one consistent message - that any enhanced-use lease or land re-utilization projects should be all about veterans and not about cashing in from private development.

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I am here to make it clear from the start that the VA must not accept proposals for the redevelopment of this property that are not focused on veterans and their families. We want this site fully devoted to veterans' health care, rehabilitation, housing and other quality of life services such as employment assistance.

Because I've always felt strongly that the property must be dedicated to veterans, Westchester County has worked with the county's Veterans Advisory Board, local veterans' organizations, the Montrose Elders and the town of Cortlandt to come up with a comprehensive plan for that portion of the site not covered by CARES. We have met with federal, state and local officials, including former Secretary Nicholson and Deputy Secretary Mansfield, to advocate for this plan, which has the potential to be a model for other VA sites.

Our "Veterans Village" would enhance VA-sponsored medical services and address the needs of both current and returning veterans. It would include a continuing care retirement community, affordable and market-rate housing for veterans, medical services that complement those provided by the VA, and transportation linkages to the rest of the county.

An entire living environment devoted to veterans, the "village" concept is firmly anchored on the foundation of an earlier plan proposed for a 20-acre mixed use development. That proposal by the Montrose Elders was submitted and approved during the VA's first RFP process and can be turned into action immediately.

Westchester County will actively participate in the RFP process and hopes to see the effort carried out to its logical and desirable conclusion – a multi-faceted property entirely devoted to the needs of all veterans.

Throughout the coming months, we hope you will see the wisdom in our proposal and move forward with a renewed sense of urgency.

Thank you.