

Congress approves veterans hospital

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WASHINGTON -- It took a vote that dragged into the early morning, but Congress on Saturday agreed to build a long-awaited veterans hospital in Central Florida.

Approval of the \$377.7 million facility has been in question for weeks, as congressional leaders deadlocked on veterans' spending.

But a breakthrough on Friday had local lawmakers cheering -- until a last-minute snag cropped up late in the evening. An anonymous senator had put a hold on the hospital bill, potentially killing the proposal until at least January.

That set off another round of frenzied politicking, until the Senate hold was lifted about 3 a.m. Saturday and the bill finally passed. With House approval given hours before, the measure now goes to the president. He is almost certain to sign it.

The Orlando facility was part of a larger proposal to authorize more than \$3 billion in veterans' projects nationwide.

Now all that remains is for Congress to budget money for the approved projects. But Central Florida lawmakers said they were confident the dollars would be delivered when Congress meets again in January.

"This sure looks great," said Rep. Tom Feeney, R-Oviedo. "We're like a football team that has to kick a field goal -- and we just got to the 10-yard line. At this point, all we need is a chip shot."

Still, the exact location of the hospital remains uncertain. Feeney and others have pushed to locate the hospital at Lake Nona, but the final version of the bill puts site selection in the hands of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The agency has narrowed its search to two places: Lake Nona and the International Corporate Park. An official with the agency said a final decision is expected in early 2007.

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