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STOCKTON - Designs are shaping up for a long-awaited expansion of medical services for veterans in the region, but exactly when the construction of a new outpatient clinic and nursing home can begin is still unclear.

It comes down to funding, which is why elected officials and local veterans are pushing as next year's federal spending plan takes shape. The total project cost is estimated to cost \$368 million, though some money has already been allocated for design and to buy the land.

"We can't really get a timeline until the funds are appropriated," said Lauren Smith, a spokeswoman for Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Stockton.

On Wednesday, McNerney sent a letter to U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki to urge funding for the project in the department's budget for the next fiscal year. The letter argues a delayed project means "thousands of veterans must drive hundreds of miles" to access far-flung medical services for veterans, and the 900 jobs that come with the facility would give a much-needed economic boost to a region hit by high unemployment.

Congressional approval is also required for funding for the project, which would be on a 52-acre parcel of land just north of San Joaquin General Hospital.

The planned facility would include a 150,000-square-foot nursing home with 120 beds and a 150,000-square-foot outpatient clinic, including dental and eye care and treatment for traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder.

An environmental report from 2011 said it could be open by 2015 or 2016. After the VA chose the location for the facility later that year, it gave an estimated opening date of 2017 or 2018, depending on funding.

"All of this hinges on congressional funding," VA spokesman Jonathan Friedman said. But if it is funded completely, it would take about three years to build, he said.

The wait has been "too long," said Tino Adame, commander of American Legion District 11, which includes American Legion posts in San Joaquin and other counties. Veterans, sometimes with debilitating injuries, have to endure long car rides to Livermore or Palo Alto to receive

medical care.

The drive can be grueling, and those who take a shuttle could end up needing a whole day to get to and from an appointment. But oftentimes, veterans will wait and take the shuttle back the following day, county Veterans Services officer Ron Green said. The county's veterans average 63 to 64 years old, he said, which makes it that much more difficult to travel.

The size of the veteran population in the county and surrounding area has always been a strong argument in efforts to bring the facility to French Camp, Green said. It's been the main argument Green and others made to the VA over the past decade to pick San Joaquin County over other counties in the region and then select the French Camp site.

There have been roadblocks along the way; the funding issue is just the latest, he said.

"The veterans are committed, ... and it will come here eventually," Green said. "How long 'eventually' is is anybody's guess."

A contingent of county government officials was on a lobbying trip to Washington, D.C., last week. The main reason for the trip was for water issues, but the VA clinic was on the agenda too. And it will likely be a topic during a transportation-focused lobbying trip in April.

"The lobbying has been a constant process," Supervisor Steve Bestolarides said. McNerney's letter comes at a good time to aid in the push to get the project started, he said. "We really want to get this thing done."

Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Turlock, has pushed to hasten the construction of the new facilities since before he was elected to a redrawn congressional district that includes the southern half of San Joaquin County.

"It's extremely important," he said. "We should fight to get this included this year."

Construction is wrapping up to expand services at the existing VA clinic in French Camp, which

the VA expects to open in March.

Denham, who is a veteran and a member of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, said he has a meeting scheduled with Shinseki later this month to talk about funding for the project and other issues.

It's time for the federal government to fulfill its commitment to the veterans, Denham said.