

Our country's armed forces and veterans are always on my mind. I strongly opposed the war in Iraq, but I hope everyone on the Central Coast knows that I work feverishly to support our uniformed men and women and our many veterans.

In less than a year under new Democratic leadership, the nation's 23 million veterans are finally seeing the attention from Congress they deserve. Congress this year provided historic increases in veterans' health care and benefits totaling nearly \$12 billion. These funds will help all vets, including the 36,000 who call the Central Coast home.

One of the most pressing issues for more than 400,000 disabled veterans and military retirees is the ongoing backlog in claims processing at the VA. To help compensate, Congress has promised funds to hire and train an additional 1,800 claim processors. Another victory for veterans was a bill recently approved by the House of Representatives, the "Heroes Earnings Assistance and Relief Tax Act" ( [H.R. 3997](#) ). Included in that bill was one of my provisions that would allow recipients of military retirement pensions to collect on excess taxes paid while waiting for VA approval of disability claims. The Senate is scheduled to take up similar legislation this month and I am hopeful we will soon begin to provide this additional relief.

The process to establish a veterans' cemetery at Fort Ord is also moving forward. A VA report released last year concluded that the most expeditious way to establish the cemetery is via the State Cemetery Grants Program. Under this program, the federal government covers all construction costs, but the state must pay for operations and maintenance costs. California has been reluctant to make this commitment, but the creation of a public-private partnership has ensured the process will move forward. At my urging along with other local leaders, the Fort Ord Reuse Authority has agreed to fund the design and planning of the cemetery.

A new veterans clinic is another priority. The current clinics in Capitola and at the former Fort Ord are simply not capable of meeting the needs of our veterans and the military. The VA and the Department of Defense recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding to move forward on the siting and design of a new outpatient clinic. Soon a feasibility study will be conducted to determine how best to serve our region's veterans.

If you need assistance or clarification about VA policies, your health care or your

compensation claim, please call one of the 17th District offices for help. Salinas: 831-424-2229 or Santa Cruz: 831-429-1976.

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