

Washington, DC - Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) today pressed Defense Secretary Robert Gates to continue the current VH-71 presidential helicopter program that is being led by Lockheed Martin in Owego, New York. During a House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense hearing this afternoon, the congressman detailed the merits of the helicopter program and expressed his commitment to using his position on that panel to continue funding the helicopter program. Hinchey later disputed claims that Gates made during the hearing about the cost and capabilities of the helicopter fleet that's currently being constructed, saying that the actual facts don't back up the secretary's argument.

"Once again, the story changes from the Pentagon about the reasons it opposes the current presidential helicopter project," Hinchey said. "Secretary Gates used inaccurate figures to describe the current helicopter program and failed to discuss the massive cost of starting from scratch and rebidding the program. By spending an additional \$3 billion on the current project we can provide this and future presidents with a full fleet of new, sophisticated helicopters that are far superior to the current fleet, which is more than three decades old. The Pentagon is trying to make the highly visible presidential helicopter program its poster child for ending government waste, when the fact of the matter is that ending the program now would be the most wasteful thing to do. The most fiscally responsible step we can take now is to fund an expanded Increment 1 helicopter fleet, which is exactly what I intend to do with many of my colleagues on the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense."

During the course of the hearing, Gates disputed Hinchey's point that an expanded Increment 1 fleet could be completed within the original budget parameters. Instead, the secretary publicly claimed for the first time that an expanded Increment 1 fleet -- the simpler, less costly of two versions of the helicopter -- would cost a total of \$9.4 billion. Hinchey said those numbers were greatly inflated for political purposes and that the cost is much less.

Gates suggested that the current project be scrapped and started over from the beginning. The congressman noted that Gates failed to highlight the fact that the Pentagon internally estimates that a newly rebid helicopter program would cost between \$14-21 billion when factoring in the \$4 billion that would have been spent on the current helicopter program, which would be terminated in order to restart the project. Hinchey also noted that any newly bid helicopter would be meeting reduced requirements set forth by the Pentagon since there is no other helicopter than the ones being developed by Lockheed Martin that can meet such standards. Gates also claimed the presidential helicopters being developed can't fly as far as the current fleet, which is inaccurate. Hinchey noted that the helicopters currently being developed can fly much farther than the one the president uses on a regular basis.

Hinchey told Gates that he was committed to a proposal he made earlier this year that would involve expanding Increment 1 of the helicopter project, which has already produced nine helicopters that are currently undergoing test flights, in lieu of moving onto Increment 2 -- the more costly and technically sophisticated phase of the project. By expanding the number of Increment 1 helicopters, it's estimated that the Navy could purchase a full fleet of 23 Increment 1 helicopters on-time and within the original budget plan. During the hearing, the chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, which is the panel that allocates funding for various defense projects including the presidential helicopter fleet, reiterated his support for an expanded Increment 1 fleet. The chairman also rejected the notion that the project should be canceled.

Hinchey reiterated that the president's budget proposal, which was submitted to Congress earlier this month, is just that; a proposal. Congress will subsequently act on that proposal, accepting many of the president's recommendations and rejecting others. The congressman said Congress has the constitutional authority to determine how federal funds are allocated and that he expects that authority will be used to continue funding the presidential helicopter program.

The next step in the legislative process is expected to occur next month when the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense begins to take up debate on how to shape the defense budget for Fiscal Year 2010. As a member of that subcommittee, Hinchey intends to introduce a provision in that bill that would continue the development of the presidential helicopter program through an expanded Increment 1 fleet.

"This is far from over," Hinchey said. "We are going to continue to fight very aggressively for this project. Secretary Gates' continued opposition to the current project was not unexpected and it does not change our determination to use our congressional authority to fund this much-needed project."

During the hearing with Gates, Hinchey talked about how the current fleet of helicopters has technology that is more than a half century old and was built in the 1970's. He also noted that at least \$3.2 billion has already been spent on the new helicopters and an estimated additional \$400-\$600 million would be needed to cancel the contract prematurely, bringing the overall cost close to \$4 billion. The congressman noted that all \$4 billion for the current project would be wasted if the Pentagon moved forward with its plan to cancel the current program, which has already produced five helicopters that are already undergoing test flights. Furthermore, Gates

reiterated the Pentagon's intention to rebid the presidential helicopter program from scratch, which would unnecessarily compound the cost of the program to taxpayers.

An additional point Hinchev made was that the current fleet of helicopters has only 10 seats. With a first family of five that includes the president's mother-in-law, and a crew of five that includes Secret Service agents, there is no room for senior staff to travel with the president, which is critical in coordinating information and instructions during national emergencies. Lockheed Martin's Increment 1 version of the new helicopter can seat 14 passengers, which would enable four staff members to travel with the president and his family. Meanwhile, the current aging fleet is being stripped down to reduce weight due to safety concerns.