

Washington, DC - With the White House set to announce its recommendation for the future of a new fleet of presidential helicopters, Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) today continued his aggressive push to sustain funding for the new aircraft, which are needed to replace the current aging and outdated fleet. Expecting that the White House will call for an end to the construction of the presidential helicopters as part of its formal Fiscal Year 2010 budget request to Congress tomorrow, Hinchey has been having high level meetings and discussions with senior Navy and White House officials to urge them to reconsider the anticipated decision even after the budget proposal is announced.

Hinchey met with senior Navy officials in his Washington office yesterday and has spoken by phone with senior White House staff and other top Pentagon officials in recent days to make his case on the helicopters. During the course of those meetings, Hinchey learned that the Navy now has new information showing that the new fleet of presidential helicopters currently being constructed by Lockheed Martin in Owego, New York has a much longer lifespan and greater structural integrity than previously expected. It's believed that Defense Secretary Gates did not have that updated information when he recommended to President Obama last month that the presidential helicopter program be canceled. The congressman is working to try to ensure that President Obama and Secretary Gates have that updated information and fully consider it as the process moves forward.

"While any upcoming proposal by the White House to cancel the presidential helicopter program would be a major mistake, it's important to note that such an announcement would be just a first, early step in a long congressional process that will ultimately determine the fate of the initiative," Hinchey said. "I've been working tirelessly to convey to senior Pentagon and White House officials just how critical this presidential helicopter program is to the safety of this and future presidents and how it would be an enormous waste of taxpayer dollars to cancel the program at this stage in the game. Lockheed Martin has done a remarkable job of constructing a presidential helicopter fleet that is far superior to the current fleet. Walking away from the program now would leave the president with no new helicopter fleet, which he desperately needs for safety and security reasons, and would waste \$3.6 billion of taxpayer money already spent on the project."

The current fleet of presidential helicopters was designed in the 1950's, constructed in the 1970's, and lack modern, secure communication equipment needed by the president in times of emergency. The congressman has also been highlighting the fact that \$3.6 billion in taxpayer money would be wasted if the helicopter program were canceled. As it stands now, if the presidential helicopter program were canceled, the helicopters already constructed and undergoing testing couldn't even be used by the president since they won't be considered

completed and would lack the funding needed to finish out remaining testing.

While Hinchey expects the White House not to call for the continuation of the presidential helicopter program tomorrow, the congressman noted that such a move would be a first step in a long process that will determine the ultimate fate of the program. The congressman fully intends to use his position on the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense to push for the program to continue receiving funding. Hinchey said he believes the White House would be making its decision to not to continue the helicopter program based on political pressure and without up-to-date information. Hinchey has spoken repeatedly with the chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense about funding the helicopter program and is confident Congress will be able to pass the funding needed to keep the construction going regardless of the president's budget request.

On March 16, 2009, Hinchey and Congressman Michael Arcuri (D-NY) led 11 other House members in a bipartisan effort calling on President Obama to proceed with the replacement of the current presidential helicopter fleet in order to adequately protect the President of the United States and to avoid wasting the \$3.6 billion in taxpayer money that has already been spent on the project.

Acknowledging that the program is over budget for a variety of reasons, Hinchey and Arcuri proposed an alternative way forward to the president that would involve expanding Increment 1 of the project, which has already produced nine helicopters that are currently undergoing test flights, in lieu of moving onto Increment 2 -- the more costly 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.

"It would be anything but a good use of taxpayer dollars to cancel the presidential helicopter program," Hinchey said. "With \$3.6 billion already spent it makes no sense whatsoever to abandon the project. Instead, I encourage the White House to work with Congress to find a middle ground where we can fund an expanded first phase of new helicopters. The bureaucracy behind the administration's expected decision to propose canceling the presidential helicopter program is astonishing. Five new helicopters that could be used by the president have already been constructed and are undergoing test flights, but even those helicopters couldn't be used by the president since funding for final testing wouldn't be available if the program is cut."

The VH-71 helicopter project has gotten recent attention in Washington because it now stands to cost more than the original contract. Hinchey noted that the budget for the new helicopter fleet has increased as the result of its advanced delivery schedule as well as previous efforts to cut its funding, which ultimately slowed the project down and led to an increase in cost.

The helicopter that the president primarily uses was constructed in 1976. The effort to replace the current fleet of presidential helicopters began following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks when it became clear that an aircraft was needed to more adequately protect the president and enable him to communicate during a crisis with top officials on the ground. In 2005, the presidential helicopter replacement contract was awarded to Lockheed Martin and its partners.

The contract calls for nine Increment 1 helicopters, including four test aircraft, which are far more modern and capable than the current fleet. Increment 1 was to be followed by 23 Increment 2 helicopters. Eight of the Increment 1 helicopters have already been constructed and are meeting or exceeding all of their performance parameters during their hundreds of hours of test flights.

Hinchey has been involved for many years with Lockheed Martin's effort to construct the new presidential helicopter fleet. The congressman helped advocate for the company to win the contract in 2005 because of its outstanding ability to construct a top of the line helicopter fleet. He also fought last year to ensure \$100 million was included in the defense budget to ensure the program received the funding it needed to continue moving forward.