

Date: August 2, 2018

Case: VA - Veterans Benefits Administration - Public Scoping Meeting for
Housing Loan Program



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Veterans Affairs
Veterans Benefits Administration
Public Scoping Meeting for Housing Loan Program
Thursday, August 2, 2018

Bethesda Marriott & Conference Center
5701 Marinelli Road
Rockville, MD 20852
6:00 p.m.

Rob Ford, President of Gryphon Environmental, LLC
(Facilitator)

Jeff London, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)
Director of Loan Guaranty Services

1 P R O C E E D I N G S

2 MR. FORD: Welcome, ladies and gentlemen.

3 I appreciate you taking the time to come out tonight
4 for our Veteran's Benefit Administration Public
5 Scoping Meeting for the Housing Loan Program
6 Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement. My name
7 is Rob Ford. I am a contractor for the VA and I am
8 also a retired service-disabled veteran, and I was a
9 beneficiary of the Home Loan Guaranty Program. I am
10 also here with officials from the VA, three
11 officials from the VA, Mr. Jeffrey London, who is the
12 Director of the Home Loan Guaranty Program; Ms.
13 Elysium Drumn, who is a co-project manager for this;
14 and Mr. Glen Whitman, who is also the co-project
15 manager. Thanks for being here, and appreciate
16 everything you do for us veterans, for our veterans.

17 A couple of administrative notes: You can
18 see we have poster up here to take a look at
19 throughout this course of the presentation. We have
20 water, we have coffee, and we have cookies, and
21 you're in a no-judgment zone if you're munching, and
22 some of you already are. Please partake in those and

1 enjoy those at your leisure. We have sign-in over
2 here. For those of you that want to make a public
3 comment, please do. You'll have the opportunity to
4 make a verbal public comment later on in this
5 presentation. Fact sheets: We have fact sheets over
6 here, so if anybody wants one, please let us know and
7 we'll get those distributed to you.

8 Now I'm going to read through each slide
9 title and I'm going to go through each slide just so
10 everybody knows that I'm really not that boring, but
11 I'm going to go through this for the sake of
12 narration when this is published on the Internet
13 site. This is an outward-facing document and live
14 file. So I'll narrate through here, enscript it
15 accordingly.

16 The Scoping Meeting agenda: Introductions
17 and overview by myself, Rob Ford. We're going to
18 follow that with a welcome by Mr. Jeff London, the
19 Veterans' Benefit Administration, Director of Loan
20 Guaranty Services; an explanation of VBA Housing Loan
21 Program, otherwise known as HLP, also by Jeff London;
22 a review of the National Environmental Policy Act,

1 also known as NEPA; Requirements of Programmatic
2 Environmental Impact Statement, also known as PEIS
3 throughout the course of this presentation. I'll
4 hold a public comment session if anyone is interested
5 in participating in that, and then I'll turn it over
6 for the final closing remarks to Mr. Jeff London.

7 Why are we here? Excellent question. VA
8 has decided their intent is to prepare a Programmatic
9 Environmental Impact Statement for the Home Loan
10 Program. Why? Because it has never been done. The
11 program was established in 1944, and predates the
12 National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Why now?
13 Again, because the VA has realized exponential, or
14 not exponential, an unprecedented number of home loan
15 guaranties in the last several years.

16 Why a Programmatic Environmental Impact
17 Statement? Well, the Programmatic Environmental
18 Impact Statement is something that is much larger in
19 scope and broader in purpose and is intended to
20 analyze the entire 54 states and territories, looking
21 at how the Home Loan Program affects specific
22 geographic regions and the administrative management

1 regions of the VA. Today, we're here to go over the
2 scoping. One of the first requirements of doing a
3 PEIS is doing public and Agency scoping. So that's
4 what we're here for today.

5 So this is the scoping period and this is
6 one of the most important pieces, where we invite
7 you, the agencies and the public to participate in
8 helping shape this document for the future benefit of
9 our veterans and the VA. So to highlight some of the
10 VBA Housing Loan Program elements, Mr. Jeff London
11 will come up here and address those. Thank you, sir.

12 MR. LONDON: Thank you, Mr. Ford, and
13 thank you for your service to our nation. And I also
14 want to recognize and thank the other members of the
15 Armed Forces and veterans of the Armed Forces; thank
16 you for your service.

17 As Mr. Ford mentioned, this program is a
18 special program because it's unlike any other loan
19 program that you may be familiar with. This is an
20 earned benefit for those who served us. And I get up
21 every day with a very simple mission in mind but a
22 very meaningful mission. In essence, the mission of

1 the VA Home Loan Program is to help veterans and
2 service members to attain, retain, and adapt homes.
3 It's that simple, and we do that through various
4 programs that we offer.

5 The first program most people are familiar
6 with, and that's the Home Loan Guaranty Program.
7 Contrary to popular belief, that particular program
8 VA does not lend the money; private sector lenders,
9 mortgage companies, credit unions, banks lend money
10 to veterans and service members. VA guaranties a
11 portion of that loan, specifically, in most cases, 25
12 percent of the loan. The great thing about that
13 benefit is it can be used on active duty service for
14 our service members. Obviously, veterans can use it,
15 and also certain surviving spouses of veterans and
16 service members.

17 The next program that we have is we
18 actually own properties. When, unfortunately, a VA
19 guaranty loan goes into foreclosure, those homes are
20 then owned by VA and are in the Secretary's name, and
21 we actually market, manage, and sell those
22 properties, not just to veterans but to the general

1 public. Anyone can purchase those properties from
2 VA. And we do that; we have a specific program,
3 where it's called the Vendee Loan Program, and that
4 is a direct loan program where VA will actually lend
5 money to any potential purchaser of one of those
6 properties.

7 The next program that we have is another
8 direct loan program that VA administers and that is
9 specifically the Native American Direct Loan Program,
10 and that's specifically for veterans who are Native
11 Americans who live on federal trust land. A lot of
12 private lenders do not want to lend on federal trust
13 land, so there's a huge need on federal trust land
14 that's specifically for our veterans. So VA, since
15 1992, has been able to lend to veterans who live on
16 federal trust lands. So we're very excited about
17 that program and we're seeing that program grow more
18 and more. We have over a hundred MOUs signed with
19 Native American tribes across the United States.

20 The next program that we have is the
21 Specially Adapted Housing Program. I mentioned that
22 third part of our mission, to help veterans adapt

1 homes. We have some veterans who are seriously
2 disabled, and this program specifically helps those
3 veterans to live more independently. And that has a
4 positive domino effect because that also helps the
5 caregivers and family members who are helping those
6 veterans, but that also gives the veteran, again, a
7 sense of independence so they can live on their own.
8 So that's a program that definitely we're very
9 passionate about in VA.

10 So to help administer this program, we
11 don't just have people here in the Washington, D.C.
12 area; we have eight regional loan centers around the
13 country, specifically, in Atlanta, Cleveland,
14 Denver, Houston, Phoenix, Roanoke, St. Paul, and St.
15 Petersburg; and we have a small operation in
16 Honolulu, Hawaii, and that office reports to the
17 Phoenix Loan Center, and they also serve the U.S.
18 Territories in the Pacific.

19 So what are the benefits of the Home Loan
20 Program? We talked about the fact that this is our
21 earned benefit for our nation's service members and
22 veterans. Well, if you think about the 25 percent

1 guaranty, that helps to entice lenders to actually
2 offer favorable terms to veterans and service
3 members. Primarily, one of the great features of the
4 programs that has been the hallmark of the program
5 since 1944 is the no-down payment feature. And
6 approximately 80 percent of our loans for the last
7 few years have been no-down payment loans, so
8 veterans are taking advantage of that advantage that
9 the VA Home Loan Benefit offers them.

10 As Mr. Ford mentioned, the last several
11 years we have had unprecedented growth in our
12 program. Last year we did approximately 740,000
13 loans. The year before that it was 705 loans, both
14 record-breaking years. And I'm very proud to mention
15 that as far as purchasing loans, going back to that
16 first part of the mission, to help veterans obtain
17 homes, both of those years were record years in
18 purchase volume, and we're planning on exceeding that
19 number in this current fiscal year. So veterans,
20 again, are taking advantage of their earned benefit.

21 One of the benefits that's not listed here
22 goes to that second part of the mission that I have

1 talked about, and that is to help veterans retain
2 homes. A lot of folks don't realize this, but VA
3 actually has the lowest foreclosure rate in the
4 entire mortgage industry and we have the lowest
5 serious delinquency rate, and that means if a
6 borrower is behind 90 days or more on their mortgage.
7 So that's a positive outcome of helping veterans to
8 retain their homes. And last year alone we helped
9 over 90,000 veterans who were behind on their
10 mortgage to help them avoid foreclosure. And since
11 2008, we've helped over 600,000 veterans to avoid
12 foreclosure. So while that's not a benefit that many
13 people talk about, that's certainly part of our
14 mission and we're proud of those results.

15 Some of the other things about the Home
16 Loan Program that's a benefit is the fact that not
17 only is it a no-down payment loan, but VA, for
18 instance, has the lowest interest rates in the entire
19 mortgage industry and that has been the case for
20 almost three years running. Also, the VA Home Loan
21 Program has low closing costs, so we really help,
22 again, those service members and veterans to obtain

1 homes and realize their American dream.

2 To kind of go a little bit into the impact
3 of the program, I talked about the low interest
4 rates, talked about the no-down payment feature. And
5 if you look here about the no-down payment, what does
6 that really mean? What is the impact? Well, if we
7 were to compare VA to conventional and FHA loans
8 from the Federal Housing Administration, if you look
9 here on the chart VA loans that have no down
10 payments, those same borrowers, those veterans and
11 service members, if they were to get a conventional
12 loan they would have to put at least 20 percent down.

13 An FHA loan, you have to put at least 3.5 percent
14 down. Of course, with VA, it's zero.

15 So as far as the number of borrowers who
16 would not qualify for conventional loans, we're
17 talking about upwards of 86 percent of those veterans
18 and service members getting a conventional loan would
19 not qualify. With FHA, again, a small down payment
20 but still a down payment, 45 percent of those
21 veterans or service members wouldn't qualify, but a
22 hundred percent of veterans and service members using

1 the VA Home Loan Benefit qualify. So that gives you
2 an idea of some of the impact of the Home Loan
3 Benefit.

4 So now I'm going to turn it back to Mr.
5 Ford to talk about the purpose of the Programmatic
6 Environmental Impact Statement.

7 MR. FORD: The purpose of a PEIS, or
8 Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, provides
9 valuable information to the decision-making process,
10 including type and level of impacts and identifies
11 potential mitigation. VA will use this information
12 in making informed decisions concerning the HLP. The
13 PEIS will analyze the environmental impact of a
14 proposed action and no action alternative. The
15 resulting record of decision will identify the
16 action selected by VA and any VA measures to reduce
17 potential impact.

18 So in this scenario, with the VA's intent
19 to develop a Programmatic Environmental Impact
20 Statement for all 54 states and territories, it's
21 inclusive of those. And we are going to address the
22 environmental and -- the intent is to analyze the

1 environmental and socioeconomic impacts of the Home
2 Loan Program as it currently exists as compared to
3 the future legislative, regulatory, and policy
4 changes which may come in the future. That is the
5 intent.

6 The idea is for this to be an enduring
7 program and the VA has taken a posture to have the
8 foresight to look down the road to see if there are
9 any barriers to this particular program in certain
10 geographic regions of the United States. It can
11 happen. It could be airshed issues, culture resource
12 challenges, things of that nature. So it's another
13 enabler. The purpose of this is to enable the Home
14 Loan Program well into the future.

15 PEIS actions analyzed. Under NEPA, we're
16 required to do a proposed action and a no action
17 alternative. Those are required. The no action
18 alternative in this scenario, I'm going to flip-flop
19 it, is looking at a snapshot in time. In fiscal year
20 2017, we're going to look at all the data elements,
21 the home loan volume that has occurred throughout
22 that duration and make that our no action and our

1 baseline.

2 As I said before, this is unprecedented
3 for the VA. It hasn't been done before under NEPA,
4 so we're going to evaluate the program against all
5 the environmental resource areas that I'll reveal
6 here a little bit later, and determine if there is a
7 programmatic level, something we need to look at even
8 further and deeper and maybe specific to a certain
9 region.

10 A proposed action is going to carry this a
11 little bit farther, where we're going to look down
12 the road and make some determinations, given the loan
13 volumes that have occurred here recently. It could
14 increase. I won't say it could increase intensity
15 down the road and it could decrease, and if that
16 happens we want to be ready for it. So we're going
17 to establish some benchmarks. The intent is to
18 establish some benchmarks and look forward and
19 determine where those thresholds are, high or low,
20 and see if those will actually have an impact under
21 the proposed action. So the no action is the
22 benchmark; proposed action is looking forward into

1 the future and, hopefully, continuing to enable the
2 program. Now, nothing is going to change currently,
3 right now; that's not the intent of the PEIS with
4 regard to how the VA does their loan guaranties. I
5 want to make that very clear.

6 The timeline, NEPA timeline. Notice of
7 Intent for this was published in the Federal Register
8 July 16th, 2018. We have a 30-day scoping period,
9 which ends by August 15th, 2018. It's estimated that
10 the draft PEIS will be available for public review by
11 the spring of 2019. VA will solicit public comments
12 after that for 45 days and will hold an additional
13 public meeting regarding the draft PEIS. The final
14 PEIS will be prepared after public comments on the
15 draft PEIS have been considered and formally
16 addressed, and the final PEIS will be made publicly
17 available for a minimum of 30 days prior to the
18 Agency's decision, which is then announced in a
19 Record of Decision, or ROD.

20 NEPA and public involvement, this is just
21 a graphical depiction of what it is that I just said.
22 And just to reiterate, these slides and this

1 presentation will be posted on the Internet on the
2 VA's website, which will come on the last slide.

3 Topics to be addressed in the PEIS,
4 aesthetics and visual resources, air quality,
5 biological resources, cultural resources and historic
6 properties, flood plains, wetlands and coastal zones,
7 geology and soils, greenhouse gases and climate
8 change, hydrology and water quality, infrastructure
9 and community services, land use and planning, noise,
10 socioeconomics, and environmental justice; and,
11 lastly, cumulative effects.

12 Now, with regard to cumulative effects,
13 it's something that I failed to mention earlier. One
14 of the additional reasons that we're doing this
15 Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement is to
16 determine if there -- it's a well known observation,
17 it's well known that soldiers or service members,
18 when we leave the service, sometimes stay and lay
19 over in the towns that we last served in. And so
20 what that does is it sometimes causes an increased
21 demand on public safety resources, traffic
22 congestion, and education. So there are potential --

1 we believe there may be some potential cumulative
2 effects or impacts from these scenarios in the
3 future. These are things that we're going to pay
4 particular attention to.

5 How to submit comments. The 30-day
6 comment period, again, is July 16th to August 15th,
7 2018. Please submit comments by August 15, 2018,
8 through one of the following methods: in writing, so
9 we have some comment cards back here where you can
10 fill out those cards and place those in those two
11 boxes in the back of the room; you can mail them to
12 the address that is in this presentation; you can
13 verbally give them to our court reporter when we're
14 finished here; you can do them on line by visiting
15 www.Regulations.Gov; and you can also do them by fax.
16 And if you do fax them, they will go to the mailing
17 address, that agency where the mailing address is.

18 Again, the purpose of this meeting is to
19 receive any comments that you have to help shape this
20 document and make it more useful.

21 At present, we don't have anyone signed up
22 for the comment period, the verbal comment period.

1 And, also, if you do have any that you would like to
2 not do verbally here in front of the audience, you
3 can do it here with our court reporter. And I'll
4 turn it back over to Mr. Jeff London.

5 MR. LONDON: On behalf of my colleagues at
6 VA, thank you for your interest in joining us this
7 evening to talk about our journey here to be
8 compliant with the National Environmental Policy Act.
9 As Mr. Ford said, we welcome your comments and we
10 will take those into consideration. And I especially
11 want to, again, recognize and thank the veterans.
12 And if we have any active-duty service members here,
13 thank you for your service. It's a pleasure being
14 with you this evening. Thank you.

15 (Whereupon at 6:53 p.m., the presentation
16 was concluded.)

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