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House passes \$354M for military construction

Louella Losinio | The Guam Daily Post Jul 17, 2017 Updated 9 hrs ago



DEFENSE SPENDING: These box trusses, shown in September last year, are part of a military construction project to house MV-22B Osprey tilt rotor aircraft hangar, to support the relocation of U.S. Marines to Guam. The House Armed Services Committee recently approved the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal 2018, which would authorize \$354 million for Guam. Photo courtesy of the Marine Corps

The U.S. House of Representatives has passed the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal 2018, which authorizes \$354.65 million for military construction projects on Guam.

The defense spending bill also includes a provision addressing the ongoing shortage of temporary foreign workers for the construction and health-care sectors.

These workers used to be able to enter Guam in numbers close to 2,000 a year on H-2B visas. Since last year, however, Guam employers who need these temporary workers' skills have seen a near-100

percent rejection of this type of visa application, and have said in court papers they're in a crisis mode.

According to an April 5 U.S. Government Accountability report on the military buildup, "the Navy expects that construction contractors will need to supplement their labor workforce with 2,800 foreign laborers to meet the demand for labor during the peak of construction."

The defense spending bill grants the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services flexibility to reverse the rate of denials for H-2B visas related to military construction and health care on Guam, according to Guam Delegate Madeleine Z. Bordallo.

The defense spending bill passed on a vote of 344-81. The hurdle for the Guam-specific H-2B visa provision has historically been in the U.S. Senate, which rejected a similar provision last year – amid the national debate about imported labor.

In total, H.R. 2810 authorizes \$621.5 billion for national defense programs as well as an additional \$74.6 billion for overseas contingency operations.

Some of the military infrastructure and housing projects in the House version of the legislation include \$40.87 million for housing facilities at Andersen Air Force Base; \$56 million for a water well field project, and; \$75 million for an aircraft maintenance hangar facility project.

Bordallo said she is "especially proud that the bill continues the progress to move forward with the Marine Realignment and provide nearly \$355 million for military construction projects in Guam."

H-2B crisis

"The bill also includes my provision to address Guam's H-2B visa crisis and provide USCIS with authority to reverse the nearly 100 percent denial rate for our construction and healthcare industries and extend Guam's exemption from national caps until 2020," she added. Guam has been exempted from the annual numerical caps on how many H-2B workers can be brought in.

Currently, Guam continues to be at an H-2B hiring standstill, despite the exemption, which ends in December 2019.

Bordallo said the Senate Armed Services Committee included a provision addressing the H-2B workforce issue in its version of the defense spending bill, and that she will work with the body to resolve the differences in in the Senate provision. "We must have an adequate workforce on Guam

that is able to support our civilian and military needs,” she said.

The FY2018 NDAA also includes the following provisions that will impact Guam:

- Transferring the former Ship Repair Facility to the Guam Economic Development Authority for the use of ship repair and other military maintenance purposes, at no cost to the Government of Guam;
- Requiring the Government Accountability Office to perform an independent review of the federal government’s handling of Agent Orange on Guam;
- Requiring the Secretary of Defense to report on steps taken to formalize the Department of Defense’s policy for the protection of cultural heritage and property during armed conflict in which the United States is engaged.
- Supporting the president’s budget request for the B-21 Raider, the Air Force Long-Range Strike Bomber program;
- Supporting the president’s budget request for a total of \$75 million for the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program;

The House version of the bill will be reconciled with the Senate version later this year.

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