

HUMC gets delay on Pascack decision

Thursday, July 9, 2009

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The proposed reopening of Pascack Valley Hospital is being postponed again — this time at the request of Hackensack University Medical Center and its partner, who say they need more time to prepare their case.

Hackensack, which had applied to open a 128-bed community hospital at the Westwood site, on Wednesday asked the state Health Department to put off a decision on its application for as long as six months.

"We respectfully request a deferral of the further review of the Certificate of Need application for the transfer of ownership of Pascack Valley Hospital ... for a period not to exceed six months," said a letter from Robin Ratliff, Hackensack's vice president.

The State Health Planning Board, which was scheduled to hear testimony and make a recommendation to the health commissioner on July 23, then canceled its meeting, a department spokesman said.

"We needed more time to prepare for the State Health Planning Board meeting, to educate our constituents," said Anne Marie Campbell, a Hackensack spokeswoman.

The medical center filed its application almost a year ago. It took many months and a protracted fight to acquire the license in federal Bankruptcy Court, before it was considered complete. Last month, about 1,000 people attended a public hearing on the application, with nearly all of those testifying endorsing Hackensack's plan.

Legacy Hospital Partners Inc., the Texas investment and hospital management company that has promised to invest with Hackensack, said its commitment hadn't changed. "We still would love an opportunity to work with them," Legacy spokeswoman Pat Ball said of Hackensack. "We understand they have some other issues to work on that are taking precedence."

Westwood Mayor John J. Birkner Jr. said he was frustrated at the "long drawn-out bureaucratic process" for a proposal he says has the overwhelming support of residents in the Pascack Valley and Northern Valley areas of Bergen County.

"I really hope the decision-makers listen to the people, and not to the institutions," he said, referring to opposition from The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center.

Both hospitals stand to lose business if a new, for-profit hospital opens in Westwood. They argue that there are more than enough hospital beds already in the region.

"A delay tactic only politicizes the issue and puts off the ultimate decision," said Megan Fraser, a Valley spokeswoman. "It does not change the fact that Bergen County has too many hospitals

beds or that a new hospital is not needed."

The delay could take the application beyond the November elections, in which Governor Corzine faces a challenge from former U.S. attorney Chris Christie. Although the state health commissioner decides such applications, Hackensack's leadership may be gambling that her boss — Corzine — would be more inclined to favor them after the election.

A six-month delay would also take the application beyond the Dec. 28 expiration date for the hospital license at the Westwood site. The license was allowed to remain open for two years — until that date — when the previous state health commissioner approved closure of the bankrupt hospital.

It was not immediately clear what the impact would be if a decision on the application was postponed beyond that date. The Health Department had no comment.

In a statement to its supporters, Hackensack said "it was determined that it would be prudent to postpone the application" and promised to let them know when a new date for the meeting was set.

Valley has proposed that area hospitals cooperate to use the former hospital site "to bring new and needed outpatient services to the Westwood location. ... We suggest using the six-month delay to develop this strategy and await Hackensack's call," Fraser said.

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