

## **The Record: Decision on divert**

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Opinion / Editorials

WHAT happened? One minute, Hackensack University Medical Center was gung-ho and full speed ahead to open a community hospital on the site of the former Pascack Valley Hospital in Westwood.

And the next minute it was asking the state for a delay of up to six months in considering its application.

The hospital is not saying why it suddenly asked last week for the delay, except for vague excuses that it needed more time to prepare and that "it was determined that it would be prudent to postpone the application."

But the application was filed almost a year ago. A state hearing has been held, packed with 1,000 people, where the testimony was overwhelmingly in favor of Hackensack's plan. The hospital has rallied public support for its proposal and lobbied hard for state approval. It has never given any indication it was less than fully prepared to go to the mat.

The sense of urgency was palpable. The message has been that the towns that had been served by Pascack Valley Hospital must have a full-service community hospital, not just the emergency room that Hackensack operates there now. It was literally a matter of life and death, Hackensack said, if ambulances had to travel to other hospitals in Bergen County that took longer to reach.

Westwood Mayor John Birkner Jr. told The Record's Lindy Washburn last week that 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. He has collected 23,000 signatures supporting the reopening.

We understand his frustration, after all the buildup. But the delay is not being caused by bureaucracy: The State Health Planning Board was on the verge of making a recommendation to the state health commissioner. No, this delay is being caused by Hackensack University Medical Center itself, in a sudden screeching halt to an intense, orchestrated and expensive campaign.

Supporters have a right to know what happened, and whether Hackensack is still committed in the long term to this project.

The delay could be good news for Englewood Hospital and Medical Center and The Valley Hospital, which have strongly opposed the effort to reopen a hospital on the Westwood site. Both hospitals say they will be weakened and likely lose patients if the plan for a new for-profit hospital is approved. Englewood and Valley have cited a respected state report that found more than enough hospital beds already exist in the region. Five hospitals now serve Bergen County.

Did Hackensack suspect the State Health Planning Board might recommend against it?

Donna Leusner, spokeswoman for the state Department of Health and Senior Services, told The

Record's Mary Jo Layton recently that the policy decision "will be made on what's in the best interest of the residents of Bergen County and the state of New Jersey." Leusner added that the factors to be considered include the economic concerns of surrounding hospitals and the state report "that absolutely found that one of the reasons for the financial trouble of hospitals is that we have too many hospitals, particularly in the northern region of the state."

But don't forget Governor Corzine is up for reelection in November. If Hackensack's application were rejected, most of northern Bergen County would be hopping mad at Corzine.

If Hackensack's application were approved, however, black leaders around the state — who represent an integral Democratic constituency — would be just as mad.

As Layton reported last week, black lawmakers and leaders have made it clear to the governor that they are troubled that while nine hospitals — most of them in urban communities — have closed in New Jersey in the last two years, the talk of opening a new hospital has been in an affluent suburb that already has five other hospitals within 12 miles.

Whether to reopen the hospital in Westwood or not is a state policy decision that's supposed to be made on solely objective grounds.

Regardless of when that decision is made — now or later — and no matter who is governor at the time, that objectivity should prevail.

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**The Record** - 150 River Street - Hackensack, NJ 07601