

Keep hospital shut, blacks tell Corzine

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African-American leaders are urging Governor Corzine not to allow Pascack Valley Hospital in Westwood to reopen.

In a private chat with the governor recently, Assemblyman Gordon Johnson said he told Corzine: "Why weaken the other hospitals, especially when another medical center is not needed there?"

The Englewood Democrat fears reopening Pascack will jeopardize Englewood Hospital and Medical Center, which serves a large population of uninsured and charity-care patients in his district and beyond.

"If Englewood suffers and clinics have to close, it's an impact that's too great for me to allow to happen," said Johnson, an officer of the New Jersey Legislative Black Caucus.

The caucus sent a letter to Corzine warning that reopening Pascack would "not only be an insult to all the urban hospitals that have already closed, it would severely damage a surviving hospital that employs a large number of minority workers."

Hackensack University Medical Center wants to open a 128-bed hospital at Pascack. Although more than 1,000 residents of the Pascack area packed a public hearing last month to urge the state to approve the plan, the proposal is opposed by other hospitals who fear it will siphon off patients.

The State Health Planning Board was to meet this month to decide whether to recommend approving the plan. However, Hackensack requested a six-month delay this week, saying it needed more time to prepare its case. The decision ultimately rests with state Health Commissioner Heather Howard.

"This is a policy decision that will be made on what's in the best interest of the residents of Bergen County and the state of New Jersey," said Donna Leusner, a Health Department spokeswoman.

Howard will consider several factors, including the economic impact on other hospitals and an earlier 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," Leusner said.

For African-American leaders, the debate resonates beyond Westwood. They're troubled that while nine hospitals – most of them in urban communities — have closed in New Jersey in the last two years, the only talk of opening a new hospital is in a more affluent suburb where residents have access to five other hospitals.

"What deeply concerns me is the perceived or real notion that we have a double standard going on here," said Estina Baker, president of the Bergen County Chapter of the NAACP. "There are

places in New Jersey where once a hospital closes, it stays closed and those residents do not have the luxury of several hospitals nearby."

When institutions like Barnert Hospital in Paterson closed, residents and mayors clamored for replacements. In Plainfield, residents staged a mock funeral for the 131-year-old Muhlenberg Hospital when it closed last year. Mercer Medical Center, meanwhile, is relocating from Trenton to suburban Hopewell.

Some health care experts see the closures as painful but a necessary realignment of New Jersey's health care system, away from fading population bases and into the suburbs. They note that the state has not prevented anyone from reopening a hospital in the areas the black caucus is concerned about — because nobody has stepped forward to buy or start up such a hospital.

Buyers are turned off in part by large numbers of Medicaid and uninsured patients and dwindling patient volume in urban hospitals. In Barnert's case, a for-profit company's plan to create a medical mall trumped other plans that would have maintained Barnert as a hospital. The licenses for Muhlenberg, Barnert and other city hospitals expired — yet Pascack Valley's license was permitted to remain open for up to two years.

Black leaders say the closings have caused inequities in access to health care for minorities — and they've taken it up with Corzine at a time when the governor is trying to shore up key constituencies before the November election.

"The eyes of a lot of us are going to be looking to see what happens with this decision and what it's based on regarding this hospital," said Rev. Reginald T. Jackson, head of the Black Ministers Council. "I don't see where this situation is any different from circumstances which cause other hospitals to be closed and remained closed."

Corzine's spokesman did not comment on the situation.

Faced with dismal ratings, Corzine can gain traction by drawing African-Americans, union supporters and other Democrats, said Brigid Harrison, a political science professor at Montclair State University. But he's in a tough spot with a big gap in independent support as well, those suburban voters that can turn elections.

"Governor Corzine needs to consider advantages of gaining votes in constituencies in Bergen County who are advocating for the hospital — and that's really important because Bergen is a bellwether in state politics — versus alienating African-American legislators who are a core constituency in his party," Harrison said. "Perhaps the best solution is to do nothing."

In fact, Hackensack's request for a six-month delay allows Corzine to do just that.

African-American leaders have plenty of company in opposing Pascack's reopening.

The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital have battled the proposal, arguing it will destabilize other hospitals. They point to a 2008 report by the New Jersey Commission on Rationalizing Health Care Resources that said the Bergen-Passaic region has so many surplus beds that a hospital could close without limiting access to care.

But Hackensack's acting president, Robert C. Garret, notes that the health care landscape has changed and hospitals have closed since the report was issued. The Pascack Valley area needs a full-service hospital, he said, and one that requires no investment from the state.

A hospital spokeswoman said Hackensack understands that residents in urban areas need more medical services and is willing to discuss that with state officials.

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