

Hospital issue becomes political

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With Election Day little more than two months away, the debate over whether to re-open Pascack Valley Hospital (PVH) has drawn interest from politicians across the state.

Republican gubernatorial candidate Chris Christie held a brief news conference in front of the Westwood site on Monday, calling for its re-opening. Robert Corrales, a spokesman for Gov. Jon Corzine's campaign, did not comment directly on Christie's speech, but said that the application must go through "the regular administrative process" and that there is "no decision pending before" the governor.

On the other side, Democratic Senator Bob Gordon of Fair Lawn and Assemblyman Gordon Johnson (D) of Englewood, have both challenged Hackensack University Medical Center's (HUMC) plan to re-open the hospital. Corzine's running mate for deputy governor Senator Loretta Weinberg has also been a vocal opponent of the hospital's re-opening. At a June 8 public hearing at Westwood Jr./Sr. High School, she voiced her opposition to the plan and was greeted by vociferous boos from the audience.

The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center have been at odds with HUMC since it bought the bankrupt PVH in March of 2008, and applied to open it as a for-profit, 128-bed facility in a joint venture with Legacy Hospital Partners, Inc.

Englewood and Valley have strongly opposed the plan, claiming another facility in the area is unnecessary and would damage an already fragile healthcare system. The hospitals have repeatedly cited the Reinhardt Report, a state commissioned report that found an overabundance of hospital beds in Northern New Jersey, as the basis for their claim. Hackensack and its supporters have argued that since the report was issued in 2008, several hospitals have closed, altering the statistics and rendering the report irrelevant.

The application was set to be reviewed by the State Health Planning Board in late July, but Hackensack requested it be taken off the agenda to give the hospital more time to prepare. There has been speculation the board was planning to recommend that Health Commissioner Heather Howard reject the application.

County Executive Dennis McNerney and several members of the Board of Chosen Freeholders are planning plan to meet with executives from HUMC, Valley and Englewood to discuss the issue and try and reach an accord. A representative from McNerney's office stated that while it has not yet been scheduled, the meeting would take place some time after Labor Day.

Julie O'Brien, a freeholder from Ramsey who is up for re-election in November, said she has supported the hospital's re-opening since "day one."

"I think that the people of Pascack Valley and Northern Valley should have their hospital. It's something that just makes sense," she said. The board has tentatively scheduled its next meeting

to take place in Westwood to hear comments from the local community. The Freeholders had passed a resolution endorsing Hackensack's plan back in December of last year.

"We would be delighted to talk about the health care needs of the community," said Megan Fraser, director of communications at Valley, "but it would be about bringing appropriate services to the area, such as the development of a medical mall at the site."

She expressed reservations about the role of politics in a discussion of health care. "The Reinhardt commission was a bi-partisan document that focused on New Jersey's entire health care system and what needs to be done. This is not about politics; this is about securing the viability of all the hospitals of Bergen County."

Westwood Mayor John Birkner said the delay in the process has had positive results. Hackensack and its supporters have reached out to legislators, especially those who oppose its plan, and reviewed the current data regarding healthcare services in the area. "They are looking at things with open eyes," said Birkner. The meeting between the freeholders, county executive and hospital executives will focus on "exploring different options and potential clinical relationships that may, along with the re-opening of PVH, serve to strengthen the healthcare network, not harm it."

At Birkner's request, many area towns have passed resolutions to place a non-binding referendum on the November ballot asking residents whether they support their town's efforts to re-open the hospital.

Emerson Mayor Louis Lamatina (D) was one of several area mayors at Christie's campaign stop on Monday.

He said that although he supports Corzine's re-election campaign, he welcomed the visit as a way to bring further attention to the efforts to re-open PVH.

"It's a shame that politics is coming to the forefront of this debate," he said. "It should be about what is right for the region."

Birkner also took issue with the use of the hospital as a campaign ploy. "I very much appreciate that Mr. Christie has come out to state his support for the re-opening of our hospital. I am, however, somewhat disappointed that he chose to do so as part of a political campaign tour on a clearly partisan stage," he wrote in an e-mailed statement Tuesday.

"This is an issue which can not be resolved on the campaign trail. It is only through continued dialog between our elected representatives, the subject hospitals, and the State Department of Health that we will see the return of a full service acute care community hospital to the Westwood site."

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