

Towns consider hospital referendums

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Pascack Valley Community Life

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As a way to gauge public support for the re-opening of Pascack Valley Hospital (PVH), Westwood Mayor John Birkner has asked area towns to place a non-binding referendum on the November ballot. River Vale passed a resolution Monday night to place a referendum on the ballot, and Hillsdale, Montvale, and Park Ridge all passed a similar resolution on Tuesday.

Hackensack University Medical Center (HUMC) has applied to the state to open a 128-bed facility at the site of the former PVH, which declared bankruptcy and closed in November of 2007. The New Jersey State Health Planning Board was set to make a recommendation to Health Commissioner Heather Howard on the application at a hearing last month before HUMC requested a delay to give the hospital more time to prepare.

“I think the main thing is to keep the issue out in the forefront,” said Birkner. “This really is an issue that’s owned by all the residents. We want to make sure they maintain that ownership. The original hospital was opened by the efforts of many private citizens who recognized the need, and we need public support to re-open it now.”

Local municipalities had to act fast to add the resolution to their council agendas. The County Board of Elections requires a governing body to pass a resolution in support of placing a referendum on the November ballot no later than Friday, Aug. 21.

Since it was first suggested by Birkner on Monday, it appears that different versions of the resolution may have been circulated. One, which was passed on Tuesday by Park Ridge, asks voters if their towns should “continue to expend resources... in support of the application” by HUMC North.

The other, which was passed by River Vale on Monday night, reads:

“Should the New Jersey State Department of Health and Senior Services approve the ‘Certificate of Need’ application by Hackensack University Medical Center North at Pascack Valley, allowing for the re-opening of a 128-bed, full-service hospital on the site of the former Pascack Valley Hospital in Westwood?”

The resolution passed in a 3-0 vote in River Vale on Monday, Aug. 10. Both Council President Glen Jasionowski and Councilman Noel Matos were absent. According to Mayor Joseph Blundo, he received the resolution via e-mail less than an hour before the meeting rendering it too late to have it placed on the evening’s agenda. The next scheduled meeting of the council is Aug. 24 – too late for the governing body to make a motion on the resolution.

Council Vice President Mark Bromberg relayed concerns regarding whether or not passing the resolution would be going against “council protocol,” but acknowledged the time sensitivity attached to the issue.

“My concern was setting precedent, but I think in light of the discussion here that everybody’s confident the two missing members have been strongly vocal in their support for the hospital,” Bromberg stated. “It would not be as if we’re sliding something behind their backs.”

According to River Vale Mayor Joe Blundo, “The feeling is that it will be an overwhelming approval and send... voices to Trenton saying, ‘We want this hospital.’”

“We don’t think that could hurt,” he continued, “[and] if the public says ‘No’, then we, all 10 towns, have been misguided and maybe we ought to back off.”

Blundo said that e-mail correspondence between several Pascack Valley mayors has shown that “not everyone agrees it’s a worthwhile exercise.”

“The overall issue of, ‘Do we want to open the hospital?’ is a no-brainer, but whether or not we want to put it on a ballot is a different question,” said Blundo. “And the purpose, simply stated, would be to send a loud message to Trenton – that we want this hospital open.”

On Tuesday, Hillsdale, which had the same resolution that River Vale passed the night before, passed an amended resolution after Borough Attorney Steven Paul advised the council that it could leave the borough vulnerable to a lawsuit.

“The legal issue that came up was whether or not the borough would have the authority to put this on the ballot because we don’t have the authority to open the hospital,” Mayor John Sapanara said.

Paul said the council could only ask the public to vote on “matters under the purview of this council.”

“It’s at least questionable,” he said. Asked by the council of the consequences, Paul said, “Worst case scenario is we could be sued for it by someone who has an interest in it.” This would include Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center, which have both opposed the hospital’s re-opening.

Administrator Victor Polce, who is also the Mayor of Old Tappan, said that he expected Old Tappan and Westwood to both take action on the resolution to demonstrate their continued support. “It could be a good idea,” he urged.

After further discussion, the council voted 4-0 (Council President Donna Schiavone and Councilman Andrew Weinstein were absent) to pass an amended resolution that asks, “Should the Borough of Hillsdale support the re-opening...” of the hospital. Paul was instructed to revise the resolution accordingly and Clerk Bob Sandt will send it to the County Board of Elections so the referendum can be placed on the November ballot.

Birkner expressed confidence that the referendum will pass by a wide margin. Hackensack has enjoyed widespread vocal support from local residents at public hearings and council meetings, but this will be the first time voters will be asked the question directly.

He said while opponents of the hospital’s re-opening – Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center – have mimicked some of its supporters’ tactics, creating a Web site and collecting petitions and letters to the editor, a referendum of voters is something they will not be able to replicate.

“This gauges the real sentiment. It can’t be duplicated. It will be a true barometer of public opinion.”

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