

## All towns vote 'yes' to reopen Pascack

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Voters in 13 northeastern Bergen County towns showed overwhelming support for the reopening of Pascack Valley Hospital in Westwood.

Ballot questions passed in each town by wide margins, showing voter approval for efforts by local officials to help Hackensack University Medical Center win state approval to reopen the facility as a 128-bed community hospital.

"It's a mandate," said Mayor John J. Birkner Jr. of Westwood, where 85 percent voted "Yes."

"There's no mistake about it. The people up here — thousands and thousands of them — recognize there's a need for the hospital."

"Trenton, take notice," said Mayor Lou Lamatina of Emerson, where three-quarters of the voters indicated support for the hospital reopening. "This vote overwhelmingly illustrates that the residents of our borough want Trenton to know that we need our hospital to reopen.

"Our elected and appointed officials must listen to the will of the people rather than cater to special interests such as the corporations that run Valley and Englewood hospitals, which are more concerned with their bottom lines as opposed to the public's well-being."

The public question was also included on the ballots in Closter, Dumont, Harrington Park, Hillsdale, Northvale, Norwood, Oradell, Old Tappan, Park Ridge, River Vale and Washington Township. Approval ranged from 57 percent in Old Tappan to Westwood's 85 percent. Of nearly 28,000 votes cast on the issue, 72 percent supported efforts to reopen the hospital.

Ultimately, the state Commissioner of Health will decide whether or not the hospital opens. But officials in the towns hope that the expression of public support will influence the commissioner's decision.

"Chris Christie promised several times while in Westwood that he would support the reopening," said Westwood Councilwoman Cindy Waneck. "We will hold him to his word."

Hackensack applied last year for state permission to reopen the hospital in partnership with Texas-based LHP Hospital Group. This summer, the hospital asked the state Department of Health to put the application on hold after executives learned that the department's staff was prepared to recommend denial of the application.

Both The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center oppose Hackensack's proposal to reopen the hospital, saying it will cause them financial harm.

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