

Valley Hospital says Pascack vote goes against the facts

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A non-binding referendum question designed to measure public support for the proposed reopening of Pascack Valley Hospital (PVH) passed by a nearly a 3-1 margin in seven Pascack Valley towns on Tuesday.

The question received 12,824 votes in favor of a hospital reopening at the former PVH site, and 4,299 against it.

Voters in Woodcliff Lake were not asked the question because the borough was unable to pass a resolution in time to place it on the ballot. Beyond the Pascack Valley, the question was also on the ballot in Closter, Dumont, Harrington Park, Northvale, Norwood, Oradell and Old Tappan.

The referendum was placed on the ballots as a way for officials in northeastern Bergen County towns to demonstrate public approval for the opening of a 128-bed community hospital at the site of the former PVH. Because the question had to center on an issue under municipal control, it asked whether voters supported the municipality continuing to "expend resources" and local officials attending meetings and public hearings to gain the state's approval of the hospital's reopening.

After PVH was closed due to bankruptcy nearly two years ago, Hackensack University Medical Center (HUMC), with a for-profit partner, Legacy Hospital Partners, Inc., purchased the buildings and grounds of the facility in a March 2008 bankruptcy auction and filed an application with the state to reopen the hospital.

Westwood Mayor John Birkner said before the polls closed Tuesday that he expected a large public mandate in favor of the hospital's reopening. "There's gonna be no doubt about it," he said. "It's not going to be rhetoric; it's not going to be a skewed ad campaign from the opposition. The truth will be told tonight."

Two other local hospitals, The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center, have opposed the reopening, arguing another hospital in the area is unnecessary and would damage an already struggling health care network.

"The results of the recent election do not change the facts," said Megan Fraser, spokesperson for The Valley Hospital. "It remains a fact that Bergen County's five hospitals have more than 300 beds that go unused each night. It is a fact that seven acute-care hospitals are already available within a 15-mile radius of Westwood. It is also a fact that all of the residents of the Pascack communities have sought and received high quality care for two years since the Pascack Valley Hospital closed and, as a result, Bergen County's hospitals are financially stronger and more stable."

Fraser said reopening Pascack Valley "will have significant negative effects on the area's

healthcare system. We do not believe this is about politics, the health and welfare of select communities or one hospital over another, but rather about ensuring that all Bergen County hospitals remain healthy and strong to serve their communities for years to come."

In June, hundreds of local residents — most in favor of the hospital's reopening — attended a state Health Planning Board public hearing on HUMC's application. The board was scheduled to meet the next month to make its recommendation to state Health Commissioner Heather Howard, who will make the final decision on the hospital's reopening.

Shortly before the board's August meeting, however, HUMC requested a delay of up to six months, prompting speculation that hospital executives might have received word that the board was set to recommend against the application's approval.

The license for a hospital at the site expires on Dec. 28, two years after the facility was officially closed by the state.

Birkner has asked Gov. Jon Corzine and Howard to extend the deadline in order to allow enough time to review HUMC's application before the license expires. Birkner said he has yet to hear back about his request, but will continue to talk to state officials about the importance of a full-service hospital in Westwood.

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