

Expiration date of hospital license draws near

Thursday, December 3, 2009

BY MEGAN BURROW

Pascack Valley Community Life

OF COMMUNITY LIFE

Westwood - As the Dec. 28 expiration date of the license of Pascack Valley Hospital nears, supporters of Hackensack University Medical Center's plan to re-open the Westwood hospital are lobbying for an extension and looking to county and state officials for support.

Westwood Councilwoman Cindy Waneck recently asked the county to place the re-opening of the hospital on its master plan to demonstrate its support of Hackensack's application to the state. Westwood Mayor John Birkner has asked Gov. Jon Corzine and the state Health Commissioner Heather Howard to extend the deadline set by the former commissioner, Fred M. Jacobs, after the hospital closed due to bankruptcy in late 2007.

Since Hackensack requested a delay of up to six months on a state health planning board hearing this summer, progress on the application has stalled. The request came just days before the planning board was expected to vote on the application. There has been speculation that Hackensack requested the delay after learning of the board's inclination to recommend the application's rejection.

The Certificate of Need and Licensure process outlined by the state department of health and senior services requires the planning board to vote on a recommendation before the state health commissioner makes the final decision.

Hackensack bought the buildings and grounds of the 28-acre site at a bankruptcy auction in March 2008, and plans to open the facility as a 128-bed full service hospital, with a for-profit partner, Legacy Hospital Partners.

Area hospitals Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital Medical Center have been vocal opponents of the plan, arguing another hospital in a county already boasting five acute-care hospitals is wasteful and unnecessary, and could endanger the financial strength of existing hospitals. The two competing hospitals have petitioned for an outpatient medical mall to open at the facility instead.

Birkner, a vociferous supporter of Hackensack's plan, said whatever the outcome, he hopes the hearing process is allowed to "run its course."

In response to the weak economy, the state legislature passed the Permit Extension Act in June of 2008 to help the struggling real estate development market get back on its feet.

The act provides a grace period of up to three years on expiring development permits and approvals, and could possibly be used to extend Pascack Valley's license into 2010.

"By virtue of that act there are some hopes that the hospital license can be extended," said Birkner. "I'm sure the opponents to the project will have something to say about that, but we are

hopeful."

Birkner said it is unclear if the extension would have to be applied for, or would automatically take effect after the license's expiration. Either way, he said the public deserves to see the application process play out. Area residents overwhelmingly spoke in support of the hospital at a June state Health Planning Board Hearing held at Westwood Jr./Sr. High School, and voted by a margin of nearly three to one on a non-binding referendum last month in support of local officials continuing their efforts on behalf of the facility.

"The residents and the people involved have been very clear," Birkner said. "I believe in the process. It shouldn't be allowed to just wither and die on the vine."

Hackensack University Medical Center did not return phone calls Tuesday seeking comment.

E-mail: burrow@northjersey.com

Find this article at:
<http://www.northjersey.com/news/health/hospitals/78391077.html>

The Record - 150 River Street - Hackensack, NJ 07601