

Hackensack hospital implores public for support to reopen Pascack Valley Hospital in Westwood

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Hackensack University Medical Center is reaching out to the public again to support its efforts to reopen Pascack Valley Hospital, this time with letters to 60,000 homes in northern Bergen County.

The letter, signed by HUMC President Robert C. Garrett, reminds recipients of Governor Christie's campaign promise to support the hospital. The letter emphasizes the benefit of creating "hundreds of good-paying permanent jobs, short-term construction jobs and ... a permanent stimulus to the local economy."

The bid to reignite public enthusiasm for the proposal comes at the same time the action has shifted to the courts, and away from the governor's office.

A hearing on whether Bergen County Superior Court is the proper venue for deciding if the Permit Extension Act applies to the hospital license for the Westwood site has been postponed until Wednesday.

It originally had been scheduled for Jan. 22, and was postponed once until today. The case has been transferred from Judge Robert Wilson to Judge Peter Coyne, the Bergen County assignment judge.

The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, an opponent of Hackensack's proposal, has demanded that the case be transferred to the Appellate Division of state Superior Court in Trenton. It has been joined by the state Department of Health and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center.

HUMC contends that the local jurisdiction can determine whether the law, passed in 2008 to help developers get through the recession, applies to the hospital site. The former state Health Commissioner, Heather Howard, ruled last month that it did not, and advised Hackensack's lawyers to appeal to the Appellate Division if they disagreed.

In the letter, Garrett asked that recipients sign a postcard and mail it to the medical center to show they "want to let Trenton know that the time has come to create jobs, stimulate the local economy and, most of all, bring quality health care to all Bergen County residents."

Hackensack had received 1,168 postcards as of Thursday, said Anne Marie

Campbell, a spokeswoman.

In response, Valley executives on Wednesday e-mailed nearly 5,000 employees, physicians, and volunteers asking them to complete the card, but add the words "I oppose reopening Pascack Valley Hospital."

The cards, to be collected by Valley's marketing department, will be delivered to Governor Christie, the e-mail said. A spokeswoman said "many, many" had been received.

Also on Wednesday, the Bergen County Freeholder Board voted to support the reopening of Pascack Valley Hospital. The board previously indicated its support in December 2008, after initially declaring its neutrality in the ongoing dispute.

Staff Writer Michael Gartland contributed to this report.

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