

Decision on hospital license to be made in Trenton

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Pascack Valley Community Life
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Westwood - The decision on whether a 2008 bill extends Pascack Valley Hospital's license will rest with the Appellate Division of Superior Court, Judge Peter E. Doyne ruled last week.

Hackensack University Medical Center (HUMC) bought the buildings and grounds of the bankrupt Westwood hospital in a 2008 auction, and applied to the state health department to re-open it as a 128-bed full service facility. It has argued that the Permit Extension Act, a bill sponsored by Sen. Paul Sarlo, and designed to help developers during the economic recession automatically extended the hospital's license past its expiration date. The license expired Dec. 28 of last year – exactly 24-months after former Health Commissioner Fred Jacobs approved the hospital's closure.

In a Dec. 22 letter addressed to HUMC, Health Commissioner Heather Howard wrote that the bill was not applicable, and recommended the hospital appeal to the Appellate Division if it disagreed with her decision.

Instead, HUMC brought the matter before Superior Court in Hackensack just before the license expired, asking that a Bergen County Superior Court judge decide whether the bill applied, but two competing hospitals, The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center, asked that the case be transferred to the Appellate Division in Trenton. The hospitals were joined by the state health department in their request.

Since last summer, when more than 1,000 people packed the Westwood Jr./Sr. High School auditorium for a State Health Planning Board public hearing on HUMC's proposal, the application has stalled, frustrating local residents who hoped the hospital would be up and running by now.

Anne Marie Campbell, a spokeswoman for HUMC, said the hospital plans to "take all the necessary steps" including bringing the case before the Appellate Division. "We are 100 percent committed to providing the people of the Pascack and Northern valley regions the medical care they deserve by opening this hospital."

HUMC is currently operating a satellite emergency department out at the facility, but cannot admit long-term patients.

Valley and Englewood have argued that another full-service hospital in the region will weaken existing hospitals while unnecessarily duplicating existing services. After the ruling, Megan Fraser, the vice president of marketing at Valley, said that the hospital was "pleased" with the ruling.

"We continue to believe the best interests of Bergen County residents are served by having the strongest possible healthcare system, and that a new and unneeded hospital will only serve to

weaken existing hospitals and the entire system," she said.

Fraser added that Valley has been caring for patients from the Pascack Valley and since the Westwood hospital closed in 2007 has expanded its services to the community. "During the past two years, we have offered a growing number of community health education programs and screenings in Pascack Valley towns and we pledge to continue our efforts to enhance our programs and services to best meet the needs of all residents."

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