

Westwood mayor wants Christie to approve reopening of Pascack Valley Hospital

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Westwood Mayor John Birkner Jr. says it's time for Governor Christie to deliver on his campaign promise and approve the reopening of Pascack Valley Hospital.

In a six-page letter to the governor, Birkner asked Christie "to please approve the application made by Hackensack University Medical Center to transfer the [license] from the former Pascack Valley Hospital to a new and reopened 128-bed acute-care community hospital in Westwood."

Birkner also asked that Christie meet with him and the mayors of the other towns in the Pascack and Northern valleys.

"There's been plenty of time," Birkner said in an interview, "for the governor, his staff, the commissioner of health, the state Health Planning Board, and the health department staff to wrap their arms around all the information. Let's move forward. We've been waiting long enough."

The governor's office said it had received the letter. "It's under review," said spokesman Michael Drewniak, declining to comment further.

The fate of HUMC's application currently rests with the Appellate Division of state Superior Court. The court is to consider whether the hospital license for the site should be extended beyond its expiration last Dec. 28. Without a favorable opinion, HUMC's application is dead.

HUMC argued that the state's Permit Extension Act, a law intended to help developers in a recessionary economy, applied to the hospital license. The state health commissioner at the time, Heather Howard, said it did not. The Valley Hospital and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center also challenged Hackensack's efforts to extend the license.

In February, a Bergen County judge ordered the case transferred to the Appellate Division, where it has not yet been scheduled for a hearing, according to Tammy Kendig, a spokeswoman. Transcripts of previous testimony are due July 6, after which the case can be put on the court calendar, she said.

"We all recognize this was an important issue in Governor Christie's campaign," said Anne Marie Campbell, an HUMC spokeswoman. "We are confident that the process will move forward."

Bergen County Executive Dennis McNerney and James Carroll, the freeholder chairman, echoed Birkner's plea to the governor. They described the hospital as a potential economic stimulus for Bergen County.

"The Pascack Valley can be at the forefront of leading Bergen County's economic recovery," McNerney said in a press release. "Reopening the hospital will put people to work, save lives and improve our residents' overall quality of life."

Pascack Valley Hospital declared bankruptcy and closed 2 1/2 years ago after nearly 50 years of operation in northeastern Bergen County. Since then, area residents have been forced to drive farther for care at other hospitals. Hackensack opened a satellite emergency department at the site in October 2008.

Both Valley and Englewood hospitals oppose HUMC's plans to reopen the Westwood hospital, saying that it will destabilize the local health care system and harm Englewood financially. Bergen County does not need more hospital beds, they say.

"The hospital's license has expired," said Valley spokeswoman Megan Fraser, "and the matter is now in court. It is time for Hackensack to move on from a plan that eliminates jobs, damages existing community hospitals and goes against recommended regional healthcare policy."

She urged "all area hospitals to come together to develop a new outpatient medical complex in Westwood, one that will bring new medical services to the community and create new jobs."

Birkner says the legal maneuvering should be put aside. He'd like the governor to use an executive order to overturn Howard's decision and a second public hearing to be held, so that the application can be decided on its merits.

"That's what we need to happen," he said. "Why do we need to be bound up in this lengthy legal process?"

A spokeswoman for the state Health Department, asked if a hearing had been scheduled or the previous health commissioner's decision reversed, said nothing had changed.

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