

N.J. opens up process for new hospital in Bergen County

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Hackensack University Medical Center has received an official “do-over” on its bid to reopen the former Pascack Valley Hospital in Westwood on Friday.

The state Health Department posted a notice inviting applications by June 1 for a new general hospital “to serve Bergen County.”

State Health Commissioner Poonam Alaigh did not guarantee that a new hospital would be approved, when she signed the notice on Friday. “The Department reserves the right to disapprove all applications ... [if] they have not satisfactorily demonstrated need,” the notice said.

She also left plenty of room for other hospitals — such as The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center, which oppose Hackensack’s plans — to make their views known.

But her call gave Hackensack what it wanted when it petitioned the state in December. It affords Hackensack a second chance to make its case without waiting for resolution of a lengthy, ongoing court case as to whether the Westwood hospital’s license expired in December 2009.

Hackensack has sought permission to open a full-service, 125-bed community hospital in a joint venture with LHP Hospital Group., a Texas-based investment and hospital-management company.

“We plan to file an application by June 1,” said Robert Garrett, president and chief executive officer of Hackensack. “At the end of the day, I think the compelling and strong case for a new hospital will be absolutely overwhelming.”

Pascack Valley Hospital, which served the communities in the Northern Valley and Pascack Valleys of Bergen County as well as lower Rockland County, has been closed for more than three years. Since then, residents with life-threatening emergencies have been transported to other, more distant facilities, including Valley, Hackensack, and Englewood. Residents have raised concerns about longer travel time and overcrowding.

Westwood Mayor John J. Birkner Jr. welcomed news of the health department’s decision, noting that he hears from local residents daily of their desire for a new hospital.

“This is big,” he said. “This is important. We look forward to sometime in the fall having a hearing at the State Health Planning Board, and by the end of the year, a decision.”

Valley and Englewood have opposed Hackensack’s plans at every turn, arguing that the health

needs of the communities once served by Pascack Valley Hospital have been met and that a new hospital would cause financial harm to existing hospitals, particularly Englewood.

“There is no need for a new hospital in Bergen County,” said Megan Fraser, a spokeswoman for Valley, Friday. “The five hospitals serving the county have ample capacity.” Fewer people are admitted to hospitals these days, she said, and as a result more hospital beds are available. Healthcare reform will continue that trend, she said.

A new hospital “will just move jobs from one hospital to another and weaken the healthcare system for all who live in northern New Jersey,” she said.

Maria Margiotta, an Englewood Hospital and Medical Center spokeswoman, said in a statement that a new hospital in Bergen County is “unnecessary, excessive and disruptive.”

“Simply stated, there is no need for an additional acute care hospital in Bergen County,” she said. “As the pressures of health care reform mount in our industry, adding beds to an already saturated market is both illogical and irresponsible, and will wreak havoc on the system.”

The Health Department’s notice invited other hospitals to submit statements about how the proposed new hospital would affect the delivery and quality of care of the services they now provide. It also said they could “document the impact of technological and/or medical advances on the future need for acute care services in Bergen County.”

The applicant, the notice said, must show how its project will expand the opportunities for medical education and doctor training in New Jersey, and “enhance quality of care” in Bergen county.

Hackensack bought the 20-acre property with Touro University at a bankruptcy auction in March 2008, but Touro has since abandoned plans to open a medical school there. Hackensack currently operates a satellite emergency department and some other out-patient services there, and calls the facility Hackensack University Medical Center North at Pascack Valley.

Applications are due by June 1, and the State Health Planning Board is to make its recommendation about whether to approve the application by Nov. 3, the notice said.

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