

Foes file challenge in hospital reopening

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Opponents have gone to court again to stop the reopening of Pascack Valley Hospital in Westwood.

In the latest salvo in a three-year battle, The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center asked the state Appellate Court on Thursday for permission to appeal Health Commissioner Poonam Alaigh's decision to call for applications for a new general hospital in Bergen County.

The commissioner's Feb. 18 call was "arbitrary, capricious, and contrary to law," according to Englewood's brief. It was crafted to allow only one hospital — Hackensack University Medical Center — to apply, the opponents say. And it was issued without a proven need for an additional hospital, they say.

"What's driving this call is Bergen County politics, not demonstrated need, and that is illegal," said Englewood spokeswoman Maria Margiotta. "We maintain that opening a new hospital in Bergen County is unnecessary and disruptive."

"The provision of health care programs and services should not be based on politics," said Valley's spokeswoman, Megan Fraser. "Those services should be carefully planned and developed to best serve all people of New Jersey."

The state Health Department and Hackensack medical center each have 10 days to file an answer, said Tamara Kendig, a spokeswoman for the state judiciary. Once the answers are filed, the motions will be considered by an appellate panel, she said.

Hackensack "is confident in the legal soundness of the state's recent decision" to call for applications, Nancy Radwin, a hospital spokeswoman, said in a statement. The medical center "strongly believes the state has complied with the relevant regulations," she said.

The health commissioner has complete authority on decisions as to whether to call for applications, she added.

The Health Department itself had no comment, said Donna Leusner, a spokeswoman.

The two hospitals want to block Hackensack's proposal to reopen Pascack Valley with a for-profit partner as a 128-bed community hospital — a plan endorsed by Governor Christie during his campaign.

Residents of the Pascack Valley and Northern Valley towns, along with their elected officials, have demanded the reopening of Pascack Valley Hospital with rallies, petitions and letters.

They cite the additional driving time to hospitals in Ridgewood, Hackensack, Teaneck and

Englewood and sometimes crowded conditions at those hospitals.

"I can assure you, the residents of northeastern New Jersey are prepared to fight twice as hard" for their hospital, Westwood Mayor John J. Birkner Jr. said Thursday.

The opposition from Valley and Englewood was expected, he said.

The opponents' briefs say that health regulations prohibit the health commissioner from considering factors like "community desire."

The factors to be considered, by law, "do not include stimulating the local economy or impacting local employment," Valley's brief said.

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