

## **HUMC can apply to re-open Pascack Valley Hospital**

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Hackensack University Medical Center won a round Friday in its long-running battle to reopen the former Pascack Valley Hospital in Westwood.

Thanks to an appellate court decision released Friday, the medical center can now file an application with the state health department to open a hospital at the site it purchased at bankruptcy more than three years ago.

The medical center will submit its application on June 1, the deadline set when the state issued its call for applications, said spokeswoman Nancy Radwin.

Hackensack wants to open a 128-bed, full-service community hospital, run as a joint venture with a for-profit partner in Westwood. Governor Christie endorsed Hackensack's plans while campaigning for governor.

"This decision constitutes very positive progress toward restoring much-needed acute-care hospital services for residents of the Pascack Valley and Northern Valley regions," Radwin said. "We are very confident the voice of the people will be heard, and their needs met, by opening Hackensack University Medical Center North at Pascack Valley."

Two judges of the Appellate Division of state Superior Court denied motions by The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center for permission to appeal the state's call for applications. Judges Philip S. Karchman and Alexander P. Waugh Jr. issued their decision on Tuesday.

The two hospitals wanted to block the state from considering applications for a new general hospital in Bergen County.

Former state Health Commissioner Poonam Alaigh issued the call in February, after Hackensack's attempt to extend and transfer Pascack Valley's old license became mired in the courts.

Lawyers for Valley and Englewood argued that the call was crafted in such a way as to allow only Hackensack to apply and that no need for a hospital had been proved.

An Englewood hospital official downplayed the importance of Friday's court action.

"It is common for the Appellate Division to decline to hear appeals at the beginning of an administrative process in order to wait for the development of a full record," said Michael Pietrowicz, an Englewood vice president. All of the legal issues raised in the

appeals can be heard once the state's certificate-of-need process has run its course, he said.

Once Hackensack files its application, the State Health Planning Board will consider it and recommend action to the state health commissioner, who will ultimately decide whether to approve or reject it. The State Health Planning Board is to complete its consideration by Nov. 3.

Englewood has argued that it would suffer financially if a new hospital were allowed to open in Westwood.

A spokeswoman for Valley said the institution was "disappointed in the court's decision, but we will continue to pursue every avenue to protect the health care system of Bergen County for all.

"There is no need for a new hospital," said Megan Fraser, "and a new hospital will only damage existing hospitals that have served the community well" in the years since Pascack Valley closed.

Residents of northeastern Bergen County have pushed for the hospital to reopen since its closure due to bankruptcy in December 2007. The time and distance to get to other hospitals in life-threatening emergencies is too great, they say.

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