

HUMC North applies to reopen hospital

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The fate of a new hospital in Westwood is now in the hands of the state.

Hackensack University Medical Center (HUMC) delivered its application for certificate of need on June 1, the final day the state Department of Health and Senior Services would accept requests to open an acute-care hospital in Bergen County.

The proposed new 128-bed hospital at the site of the former Pascack Valley Hospital would cost \$39.6 million to renovate and would open in late 2012 or early 2013.

According to Department of Health and Senior Services spokeswoman Donna Leusner, the department will now review the application for completeness. Once the application is deemed complete in August, there will be a public hearing relatively close to the hospital, Leusner said, and the department will accept written statements from the public in regard to the application.

"That input, along with the application, would be what the department staff would use to make a recommendation to the [state health] planning board," Leusner said. It is anticipated the board will make its recommendation to state Health Commissioner Mary O'Dowd at a meeting on Nov. 3. The commissioner would then have 120 days to make a decision.

'A lacking region'

Mired for the past couple of years in a lawsuit to extend Pascack Valley Hospital's operating license to reopen the hospital, HUMC decided to take a new route last December by asking the health department to "substantiate a call" to allow for entities to submit a certificate of need to operate a new hospital at the location of the old Pascack Valley Hospital. The former state health commissioner accepted the petition and made a call for certificate of need applications in February, outlining a June 1 deadline for submission. Several weeks after the state's decision to accept applications, Ridgewood's Valley Hospital and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center asked the state appellate court for permission to appeal the commissioner's call; the two hospitals were denied by appellate division judges in April.

The application, which was submitted by PV Joint Venture (made up of HUMC and LHP Hospital Group (LHP)), describes the Pascack Valley as a "region that lacks ready access to acute care hospital services." The application argues that "poor management and overexpansion" were the reasons why Pascack Valley Hospital shut its doors in 2007 due to bankruptcy, as opposed to a lack of community need for the hospital.

The hospital would provide 50 percent fewer beds than Pascack Valley Hospital did – "ensuring that there will be no negative impact on other existing hospitals in Bergen County," the

application states.

Englewood and Valley do not see it that way.

"We maintain that the commissioner issued the special call without finding that there was a need for an acute care hospital at the former Pascack Valley site," said Maria Margiotta, director of communications at Englewood, in a statement. "The only basis for the commissioner's decision to consider reopening Pascack Valley Hospital is political demand and pressure. Political and profit-driven motivations do not justify a certificate of need, nor should they be the factors driving healthcare facility planning in this region."

Margiotta said that evidence points to a decline in the overall number of inpatients in Bergen and the county has "more than adequate inpatient bed capacity."

Ridgewood's Valley Hospital claims the Pascack Valley is "well served by five acute care hospitals within 12 miles of Westwood."

"We also maintain that opening a new hospital in Bergen County will have a devastating effect on the county's healthcare system, causing harm to hospitals that today are delivering high quality care to the communities they serve," said Valley Hospital spokeswoman Megan Fraser in a statement.

HUMC pointed to a 2009 referendum in which 75 percent of voters were of the opinion that Pascack Valley Hospital should be reopened.

"Since 2008, HUMC has operated a satellite emergency department at Pascack Valley, but the healthcare needs of this community extend far beyond the limited services currently available at this facility," said Tom Kruse, a vice president at HUMC, in a prepared statement. "Access to convenient, comprehensive hospital services is essential."

Recently named CEO of the proposed HUMC North hospital, Richard Freeman, as well as his employers, believe the application will be approved.

"We're very confident," said Freeman, who officially started as CEO in May. "We've dotted all the 'i's and crossed all the 't's so there's really no reason it shouldn't open."

Freeman said he has spent most of his time up to this point meeting with the local community and businesses – the latter of which he said should benefit from a "huge economic boon" because of the renovation and reopening of the hospital. The \$40 million renovation will "modernize" and "re-engineer" the hospital, Freeman said.

"I support the certificate of need application as its written and within the arguments associated with the physician need, demand analysis – it proves its point of why a hospital is needed in that community," Freeman said.

Planning board meeting

Freeman, who was previously the COO of Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City, said he will be attending the Westwood Planning Board meeting this Thursday to introduce himself to

the community.

The planning board is scheduled to begin its Master Plan review of the hospital zone and other related zones at the June 9 work session meeting.

The borough clerk announced earlier this week that there would likely be a quorum of council members at the planning board meeting, indicating that a majority of council members would be on hand for the meeting. The board is anticipated to make a recommendation to the borough council later this year to adopt amendments to the Master Plan.

"It's important and I want to make sure I hear it and understand it," said Council President Robert Miller, who will be attending Thursday's meeting. "Much hard work is still ahead of us."

Mayor and planning board member John Birkner, Jr. said he was pleased the application process was underway and that it had been "a long time coming."

"The need for the hospital hasn't diminished," Birkner said. "We have an opportunity now to shape the vision of the future as well. This is a very important meeting."

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