

State reviews Pascack Valley Hospital bid

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The state Health Department is asking questions about Hackensack University Medical Center's application to reopen Pascack Valley Hospital in Westwood, including whether a new hospital is needed.

Senior staff members reviewed Hackensack's 2-inch-thick application for "completeness" and fired back two dozen questions.

One asks Hackensack officials whether anyone has died as a result of the increased travel time from Pascack Valley and Northern Valley towns to emergency rooms at other North Jersey hospitals, and if so, to provide proof that the travel time was a factor.

"Document how many patients have expired as a result of the additional travel times to the other area hospitals," the question says. "Document that it was the additional minutes that led directly to preventable mortality."

In Question 12, the reviewer notes, "It appears that there is more than an adequate number of [hospital] beds available on any given day of the year," and asks, "Why do you believe that consumer needs in the proposed 'core area' for HUMC-North are not being adequately met?"

The reviewers also asked hospital officials to explain why "Pascack Valley Hospital's closure has not precipitated a health care crisis in the area caused by a lack of hospital services."

The review questions were obtained through an Open Public Records Act request filed by The Record.

"We welcome the [Health Department's] thorough review," said a Hackensack spokeswoman, Nancy Radwin, declining to comment on the answers to the questions until they are submitted to the department on Friday.

'Remains confident'

Hackensack has applied to open a 128-bed community hospital at the former Pascack Valley Hospital in a joint venture with LHP Hospital Group, a for-profit management and investment firm from Texas. The hospital would have a cardiac catheterization lab, but no inpatient pediatric services.

Hackensack "remains confident that this fair and open process will finally restore much-needed health care services to the Pascack Valley and Northern Valley regions," Radwin said.

The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center have opposed

Hackensack's plans at every turn, but their legal challenges have failed.

The Health Department's questions "reinforce the position we have long taken," said Megan Fraser, a Valley spokeswoman. "There are hundreds of hospital beds available nightly to all Bergen County residents. ... There continues to be no need for a new hospital in Bergen County."

Englewood spokeswoman Maria Margiotta said, "The county is well-served now and for the future. It's been well-documented. There is no need for a hospital to reopen there."

Hackensack's application is similar to one filed in July 2009 to transfer the old hospital's license to Hackensack. Hackensack asked that it be put on hold when it learned that Health Department staff would recommend to the state Health Planning Board that it be rejected.

Since then, Chris Christie became governor. As a candidate, he stood in the parking lot of the closed Westwood hospital and expressed support for its reopening.

In this latest round, Hackensack petitioned the Health Department in December to "call" for applications to open a new hospital in Bergen. The resulting call was the first time applications for a new hospital in such a specific area have been solicited.

But the call did not guarantee that a new hospital would be approved. "The Department reserves the right to disapprove all applications ... [if] they have not satisfactorily demonstrated need," the notice said.

Several of the review questions address the issue of whether a new hospital is needed. For example, they ask for population projections, including for the over-65 age group, for the "core area" towns that would be served by HUMC-North, as the proposed hospital is called. Those towns include Westwood, Closter, Emerson, Harrington Park, Hillsdale, Montvale, Northvale, Norwood, Old Tappan, Park Ridge, River Vale, Rockleigh, Washington Township and Woodcliff Lake.

They ask Hackensack to explain why it believes that "6,811 patients who currently receive care at other in-state and out-of-state hospitals would now change providers" and go to the Westwood hospital for care.

They ask how many patients treated at the satellite emergency room, which opened in October 2008, came from the core area and required hospital admission.

And they ask whether recruitment of staff for the new hospital would hurt staffing at other Bergen County hospitals and leave them with shortages. Is there "an abundance" of professionals and other staff ready to go to work there, they ask.

Several of the questions focus on the need for a cardiac catheterization lab in Westwood, when the number of such cases in Bergen has dropped more than 20 percent over the past four years. The reviewer asks Hackensack officials to explain how it would not harm existing programs at every other Bergen hospital.

The questions must be answered, and the application deemed complete, before the proposal

advances to consideration by the State Health Planning Board. There is no deadline for responses.

"This is a back and forth," said Donna Leusner, a department spokeswoman. "Until we decide the questions have been answered," the review is not considered complete.

The original timetable said the completeness review would be done by Aug. 6 and the State Health Planning Board would make its recommendation by Nov. 3. The board canceled its September meeting; the next meeting date would be Oct. 6.

Hackensack said in its application that the new hospital would open in November 2012.

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