

Valley Hospital will sue to stop the opening of 128-bed Westwood hospital

Thursday, December 1, 2011

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The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood is pursuing litigation to stop the likely opening of a 128-bed hospital in Westwood, Valley's board chairman said Thursday.

"The board strongly believes that opening another hospital in this region will severely damage existing hospitals and the health care system of Bergen County," said Vincent Forlenza, chairman of the Board of Trustees.

The State Health Planning Board voted 5-1 this week to send a recommendation for approval of a scaled-down version of Pascack Valley Hospital to Health Commissioner Mary O'Dowd, who is expected to make her decision by the end of the year.

The board "has agreed to move forward with a legal strategy so that this issue may ultimately be resolved in a court of law," Forlenza said in a prepared statement.

A lawsuit can't actually be filed until the health commissioner takes action, but the decision to pursue litigation was made by the board at its regularly scheduled meeting Wednesday.

Valley Hospital and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center have long opposed Hackensack University Medical Center's plan to open a hospital at the former Pascack Valley site, claiming the area already has excess beds.

A report by the staff at the state health department strongly endorsed the plan, known as HackensackUMC at Pascack Valley.

Not only will the hospital strengthen health care in the area, but failure to establish the hospital "would place the residents of the Pascack Valley and Northern Valley at greater risk when health care emergencies arise and immediate care is essential," the state concluded.

Valley officials suffered twin defeats Tuesday. The Ridgewood Village Council overwhelmingly rejected the hospital's \$750 million proposal to double in size, citing concerns over traffic, construction and safety of residents and their homes.

Forlenza said a decision regarding the council's action has not been determined. "We will take some time to review all options available to us," he said.

Meanwhile, the board announced its full confidence in Audrey Meyers, the hospital's president and chief executive officer, and executive staff. The board "looks forward to working with her and the hospital's entire executive team on these important issues for Valley's future," Forlenza said.

Pascack Valley Hospital closed in 2007 in bankruptcy. Hackensack and a partner purchased the facility the following year.

Englewood officials have also promised legal action if the commissioner approves the license for Hackensack to open the Westwood center.

James M. Hirschhorn, an attorney representing Englewood, said the hospital will first ask a court for a stay or to block implementation of the commissioner's decision, then argue that its objectives were not addressed in the state's review of the project.

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