

Fate of hospital now rests in commissioner's hands

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The former Pascack Valley Hospital is one step away from coming back to life.

The State Health Planning Board voted in favor of granting Hackensack University Medical Center (HUMC) a certificate of need to open a new acute care hospital in Westwood at a public hearing on Tuesday morning, Nov. 29. The board's vote counts as a recommendation to State Health and Senior Services Commissioner Mary O'Dowd, who now has 120 days to make a final decision on the fate of HUMC's application to reopen the old hospital as HUMC North at Pascack Valley.

The State Health Planning Board voted 5-1 to recommend the new hospital open after hearing testimony from a state health department representative, the applicants and members of the public.

State Health Planning Board Chairwoman Judy Donlen said she was "skeptical" of the prospect of a new hospital at first, but felt there was a substantial need based on the state health and senior services analysis and report that recommends a new hospital.

Overflow from HUMC and residents from Rockland County would make up a good portion of patients at HUMC North at Pascack Valley, she said, and should not have a profound effect on Englewood Hospital and Medical Center and Ridgewood's Valley Hospital.

However, she did express concern that the state pay close attention to the effect a new hospital has on other facilities in the area.

"The potential for risk to the existing hospitals is still there but I'm hopeful the department will monitor that," she said.



Area residents listen to testimony prior to the State Health Planning Board's vote to recommend granting Hackensack University Medical Center (HUMC) a certificate of need to open a new acute care hospital in Westwood at a public hearing on Nov. 29. HUMC based in Pascack Valley residents that made up some of the standing-room-only crowd, comprised mostly of hospital supporters.

STAFF PHOTOS BY CHRIS PEDOTA/THE RECORD



The State Health Planning Board, pictured, voted 5-1 on Nov. 29 to recommend the reopening of Pascack Valley Hospital as HUMC North at Pascack Valley.

The state's report, which was released on Nov. 21, made a recommendation to the state health planning board that HUMC be allowed to open a 128-bed acute care hospital in Westwood at the site of the old Pascack Valley Hospital, which closed its doors in 2007.

HUMC's proposal for a new hospital includes a \$39.6 million renovation of the former Pascack Valley Hospital site to "modernize" the facility.

Doug Duchak, the CEO and president of Englewood, cited different instances, including the hospital's closure in 2007 and the Reinhardt Commission Report in 2008, to back up the hospital's stance.

"So what has changed? In 2011 we have more of a compelling argument to keep it closed," Duchak said. He insinuated that the change may have been a "campaign promise" made by Governor Christie when he was running for office in 2009.

He also argued that seven hospitals within 12 miles of the proposed HUMC North were plenty, and by opening a new hospital it would cause "chaos in the County of Bergen" and layoffs and cuts and services at Englewood.

The opening would cost the hospital \$15 million in revenue per year, Duchak said.

Valley Hospital CEO and president Audrey Meyers told the board the Ridgewood hospital could lose up to \$24 million annually if the new hospital opened, and it would "destabilize and cause irreparable harm to the already fragile healthcare system in Bergen County."

Both Duchak and Meyers argued the factors the board must consider when determining a need for the hospital were not met in HUMC's application.

Public officials such as senators Paul Sarlo and Gerald Cardinale, Assemblyman Bob Schroeder, Assemblywoman Charlotte Vandervalk, Assemblywoman-elect Holly Schepsi and the mayors of Harrington Park, Westwood, Woodcliff Lake and others, addressed the board, all in favor of opening the hospital.

"This is not a political issue," said Westwood Mayor John Birkner, Jr. in his statement to the board. Birkner touted the borough for its "unique" infrastructure and its suitability for the hospital to succeed.

Although all but one member of the public supported the opening of the hospital, Donlen reiterated after the comments that in almost every certificate of need application case the public is overwhelmingly supportive, and it would not consider that when determining a need.

When delivering her reason for voting in favor of reopening the hospital, Donlen noted that it was a "shame" when the original hospital closed and that it likely closed because of "bad management."

The report Donlen said she partly relied on to make her decision also argued that one of the reasons HUMC North at Pascack Valley was needed was not because of a lack of availability of services in the region, "but more the lack of accessibility to such services due to the increased travel times."

HUMC President and CEO Robert Garrett and LHP President and CEO Dan Moen made a short presentation to the board during the hearing, giving background on their respective track records. While questioning the applicants the board expressed concern over the separate computer operating platforms that HUMC and LHP currently use, since HUMC's Hackensack facility will work closely with the proposed new hospital. After coming back from a board ordered lunch break Garrett commented that the two sides would work hard to come toward some type of solution to enhance digital communication between the two sides.

"It will be a challenge, but we can handle it," Garrett told the board.

Sharol Lewis was the only board member to vote against a new hospital, stating she did not believe there was need for a new hospital based on all the information she received.

Garrett said if the commissioner approves the opening, HUMC's first steps would be to close its transaction with LHP and move forward with the renovation project. The hospital would be up and running within 12 months, he said.

Following the board's vote Garrett received well-wishers on their way out of the auditorium.

"I'm elated at the board's decision," Garrett said. "I always felt our application was strong and now it's been validated by the board's vote."

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