



Hospital Expansion Awaits Final Approval

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Advocate Health Care received final authorization this week to build a \$240-million addition onto Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge.

The Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board gave conditional approval for the project during a Tuesday, Nov. 1 hearing in Carbondale. The decision allows Advocate to break ground on the west side of the LGH campus in April and open a new, 192-bed tower in early 2009.

The Park Ridge City Council discussed the hospital expansion project Monday, Oct. 17 and showed unanimous support during a first-reading vote; the city council is expected to confirm that vote during its Monday, Nov. 7 meeting.

In addition to Park Ridge City Council, the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board is also required to give its approval for the LGH expansion.

The planning board's approval is conditional on Advocate's compliance with a request that it share a report on its capital investment policies with state officials. The condition was tacked on amidst allegations that Advocate invests more money in facilities located in affluent areas, such as Park Ridge, rather than hospitals in the inner-city of Chicago.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which represents many non-medical hospital employees, has been the most vocal critic of Advocate's investments.

Both sides of the issue, however, seemed to be content with the planning board's ruling on the proposal after the hearing concluded.

"I think, as a whole, the conditional approval of the expansion of Lutheran General Hospital is the right move," said Vasyi Markus, policy director of the SEIU Hospital Accountability Project. "I think it's a fair result. I think that the people in Park Ridge and Des Plaines can get a modern facility, and it's a fair result in that the facility does not come at the expense of the people of Chicago and the South Side."

Tony Mitchell, spokesperson for Advocate Health Care, said that his corporation will have no trouble complying with the request. "Advocate agreed that we are going to sit down with the representatives of the board and staff," Mitchell said. "We said we would be happy to speak with them about our investments and our commitment to the communities we serve."

The conditional approval was also a result that neither side had really expected. "The condition has not been raised before," Mitchell explained, "but because the SEIU has taken data from a very narrow scope and therefore used to skew the picture of our investments, it's an issue that has come up frequently with the board."

Mitchell further described the request for investment information as "an opportunity for us to share with the board and its staff the kind of commitment we have to our hospitals in the city as well as those in the suburbs."

Markus said that the SEIU hopes to keep the issue alive to its conclusion, when the planning board can get a clear picture of Advocate's investment practices. "We're looking forward to an open process," he said. "We're looking forward to a process that involves everyone, a process that will really confirm a commitment from Advocate to those [inner-city] hospitals that are already operating."

"We will certainly continue to monitor investment patterns and practices to ensure that everyone in the Chicagoland area gets the same kind of access to health care provided by Lutheran General Hospital," Markus added.

When completed in 2009, the bed tower will feature 192 single-occupant hospital rooms. Many rooms will be reserved for the critically ill, while others will be dedicated to cancer patients and recipients of bone marrow transplants, stroke victims, neurology patients, as well as those who are recovering from surgery and other forms of general medical care.