

Despite deferral, seeds of a deal in place on hospital expansion



Drawing shows proposed design of Virginia Hospital Center expansion. (mkillian)

Arlington County Board members on Sept. 22 pushed off until December further consideration of Virginia Hospital Center's expansion plan, a move that potentially could jeopardize the government's long-sought land swap with the hospital and marked a victory – of sorts – for neighboring residents who were displeased with several factors of the proposal.

But in some respects, the hospital came away with victories: County Board members hinted they were in accord with the broad outlines of the proposal (including portions that had riled neighbors) and agreed that the project will not have to again run the gauntlet of commission meetings and a public hearing.

The vote for a three-month delay on the hospital proposal followed a recommendation of the Planning Commission, which had recommended deferral.

"I completely understand the hospital wishing to expand its site, and I am hopeful for it. I get it. But I think it can be done in a better way," said Planning Commission member Nancy Iacomini, who earlier this year led a task force that had tried to cobble together broad consensus on the plan. It was an effort that succeeded in some areas but fell short in others.

Hospital officials, whose staff showed up in large numbers at the Sept. 22 meeting, said the project already had been delayed too long, given the need that exists.

"Every day . . . there are four, five, 20 admitted patients holding for hours in our emergency room, awaiting a bed," said James Cole, the hospital's CEO, who told County Board members that four years of planning, more than three dozen community meetings and over 100 changes to the original plan had brought the effort to where it is today.

"It's not the perfect project" from either the hospital's view or that of neighbors, Cole said. "Perhaps that means it's the right project."

That also was the view of county staff; County Manager Mark Schwartz had recommended approval.

The \$250 million hospital-expansion project aims to use land currently owned by the Arlington government adjacent to North Edison Street, just north of the existing hospital campus. In return, the hospital is expected to trade to the county government a large parcel it owns on South Carlin Springs Road.

The land swap, which county officials covet, can't move forward until the hospital's development plan wins County Board approval. State regulators already have approved 44 additional beds that would be provided as part of the expansion; hospital officials anticipate they could need 100 more in the next five years.

While the Sept. 22 vote could be seen as detouring a proposal that hospital officials had said was their final offer, the seeds of a final deal actually could have been sown.

While postponing a final vote, the "asks" of the hospital by the County Board appear relatively modest:

- Improvements to connections to and through the site.
- Enhancement of the façades of the planned parking garage.
- Providing a pedestrian connection between 19th Street North and a proposed terrace overlooking the sunken garden on the first floor of the outpatient building.
- Making improvements aimed at better accessibility on pathways throughout the site.

But for now, the land swap is on hold. Also now in flux are the agreements made by the hospital to expand behavioral-health services as part of an larger facility.

That agreement offered "a rare opportunity to expand and improve mental-health services to Arlington residents – a much-needed community benefit," said Anne Hermann, chair of the county's Community Services Board, which supported the expansion's proposal.

The overall development project, as presented to the County Board, had been opposed by leaders of surrounding civic associations, who say they are not being NIMBYs but rather looking out for the long-term interests of residents.

"There's no direct benefit [of the expansion plan] to the people I represent," said Jim Derrig, a board member of the John M. Langston Citizens Association.

Derrig said the hospital's argument that it needed a quick decision is spurious.

"They want to expand on the backs of the Arlington taxpayer," he said. "They are certainly not a charity case, although they certainly try to play off that very much."

Virginia Hospital Center (originally Arlington Hospital) has occupied its current campus since opening in the 1940s. Obtaining the Edison Street property will allow for expansion of the otherwise land-locked facility, and would serve as the first step of a major, decades-long redevelopment of the campus.

Because it has no room to expand, "every inch of this land is very, very important," said Nan Walsh, an attorney representing the hospital.

The ultimate irony? The hospital at one time owned the Edison Street campus outright, but years ago sold it to the county government in the assumption it would not be needed in the future.