

## Virginia Hospital Center encounters some pushback on its expansion plan. What will the Arlington board do?



Virginia Hospital Center is gearing up for the Arlington County Board's upcoming vote on its proposed expansion, a project that would create a new medical building and parking garage on land currently owned by the county.

A decision from the board, scheduled for Saturday, comes after recommendations to approve the project from county staff and a transportation commission. Arlington's planning commission, however, recommended the board defer a decision because of issues with parking garage design, building height, entrance layout and architecture, among other elements.

The board is now reviewing the hospital's application, along with these recommendations and public comments, said Arlington County Board Chair Katie Cristol in an email to the WBJ.

The planning commission's stance doesn't mean the board won't approve the project. It also doesn't change the hospital's plan ahead of the vote, according to Adrian Stanton, VHC's vice president of business development and community relations.

But it raises questions the hospital will look to address if it hasn't already, he said. Otherwise, "we're kind of at the end of that rope," now in the waiting game until the board makes a call. The expansion plan has been in the works for more than three years.

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Among the planning commission's points of concern: the parking garage. The hospital previously changed its plan, cutting the structure's proposed height from 90 feet (eight levels) to 67 feet (six levels), and adding levels underground. "So we think we've done quite a bit to change the parking to something that hopefully is acceptable to folks," Stanton said, adding that parking is "a tremendous need for us, immediately today and going forward." The hospital currently leases five lots from outside entities with shuttle service for its employees — which, Stanton said, makes recruiting and retaining top talent tough.

Still, the garage is one of the planning commission's biggest issues with the project, Planning Commission Chair Jane Siegel told me. It creates a long brick wall with no breaks, "like the hospital on the Edison [Street] side has turned its back on the neighborhood," she said.

The planning commission also said the hospital should have undergone a Phased Development Site Plan, a process for large commercial projects that requires projections of future development activity on the site. Because it provides a clear picture of how the project may evolve over time, it would have made the planning commission “feel more comfortable that all options have indeed been explored,” Siegel said. “We don’t feel that way.”

But for Virginia Hospital Center, this wasn’t feasible, Stanton said. “Aside from the time delay and the impact to our patients, because we’re dealing with the capacity constraints today...” he told me. “That would be very difficult for any health care institution to try to do with how the environment is changing.”



An aerial view of the Virginia Hospital Center complex. Outlined in red is the five-acre county property it plans to acquire and expand on.

The board’s approval would be the step to allow the hospital to work toward a deal with Arlington County to purchase the Edison site, at 1800 North Edison St — land the board granted the hospital the option to purchase for this project, back in 2015 when this project was first raised. The Edison site has housed county offices

The county would then negotiate a land-swap agreement that would allow the hospital to take possession of that site, and turn over another property it owns at 601 South Carlin Springs Road. It’s been estimated as a \$12.5 million deal, but will depend on a difference in value between the two sites, and how they choose to work that out, according to Stanton.

The land deal could close between January and June of next year, and the \$250 million construction project is expected to take between 24 and 30 months to build the garage and 140,000-square-foot outpatient facility. That new facility is where existing outpatient services will be moved, to make room for an inpatient expansion in the existing hospital building for cardiac, cancer, stroke and surgical inpatient bed needs, as well as mental health and emergency department expansion. That move and \$50 million renovation would follow the construction.

The currently 357-bed hospital is still hoping to add 100 beds, already with an OK from officials to add 44 beds and plans to request more down the road, Stanton said.

The county board could deny the project or recommend a deferral, which would set the timeline back significantly, Stanton said. “So for us, any delay is just compounded, because we’re unfortunately dealing with capacity constraints, and our patients are suffering as a result of that.”

The public hearing will be the board’s first agenda item at its September meeting, likely to begin around 9 a.m. or 9:30 a.m., according to Cristol. Members of the public may attend.