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NORTH PORT

North Port gives up on hospital

By Michael Scott Davidson

scott.davidson@heraldtribune.com

Published: Tuesday, March 29, 2016 at 6:30 p.m.

In an abrupt about-face, a divided North Port City Commission on Tuesday voted to abandon efforts to obtain the state's permission to build a hospital in the city.

The 3-to-2 vote came after a months-long effort that cost taxpayers an estimated \$100,000 to bring a hospital to the county's largest and fastest-growing city.

It also reflected the reality that North Port could not find a hospital company with which to partner. Going alone meant long odds at getting a certificate of need from Florida Agency for Health Care Administration, according to consultant Kathy Platt.

Even so, the decision sparked rancor from dissenting commissioners and advocates who had collected more than 2,000 letters from residents in support of a hospital.

Mayor Jacqueline Moore made the motion that ultimately passed: "to decline to move forward with any (certificate of need) for a new hospital in North Port, and instead continue to collaborate with (Bayfront Health) and/or (Hospital Corporation of America) and/or anyone else with healthcare options for North Port."

Bayfront Health, a hospital network owned by Tennessee-based Community Health Systems, includes Venice Regional Bayfront Health and Bayfront Health Port Charlotte. Hospital Corporation of America, based in Nashville, owns Englewood Community Hospital, Doctors Hospital of Sarasota and Blake Medical Center in Bradenton.

Dissenters Vice Mayor Rhonda DiFranco and Commissioner Cheryl Cook said the motion's language prohibits the city from further attempts to pursue a hospital.

"This ended it," Cook said. "Nothing will change. As the city continues growing, this will never come up again."

Commissioner Linda Yates, who supported the motion, said it still kept the door open for a hospital company to bring a hospital to the city.

"It puts an end to the prospect that the city would be a filer for the certificate of need," she said. "It would be a private entity that would pursue the certificate of need if they determine they're willing and able to put a hospital here in North Port."

Sam George, chairman of the Community Health Action Team of North Port who spearheaded much of the effort, said the decision increases the chances Sarasota Memorial will be allowed to build a new 200-bed acute care hospital in nearby Venice.

If that happens, it will likely be years, if not decades, before the state will allow a hospital to be built in North Port, George said.

"I'm disappointed in the short-sightedness of our commissioners," he said. "I think they were in way over their heads."

George added that he had collected more than 2,000 letters of support from city residents this month.

On Tuesday, Sarasota Memorial spokeswoman Kim Savage said the hospital is on schedule to submit its final certificate of need application by April 13.

Platt told commissioners that the city could protest Sarasota Memorial's proposal to construct a new Venice hospital. That includes writing an opposition letter to the state and making public statements at a public hearing on April 19.

Platt said she expects both Hospital Corporation of America and Bayfront Health will oppose Sarasota Memorial's plans during the public hearing.

City Manager Jonathan Lewis said his staff had reached out to eight hospital companies, none of which offered to partner with North Port. That included Community Health Systems; Tennessee-based Hospital Corporation of America and a hospital company based in Toronto.

"I've personally talked to all of them that would return our phone calls," he said. "I can't speak for all of them, but one of the major issues with them was the time frame. ... It's something they do over a year or so, not six or seven weeks."

Lewis estimated that it cost the city about \$100,000 to get this far in the process, including consulting fees from Platt and law firm Greenberg Traurig, and \$10,000 the city paid to file its initial certificate of need shell application.

On Tuesday, commissioners unsuccessfully attempted to pass two motions that would have kept the process alive, before a majority voted in favor a third motion that essentially ended the city's effort to seek state approval.

Yates presented the first failed motion, asking commissioners to not submit a final application for a certificate of need during the current application cycle and instead continue searching for a hospital partner.

That failed 1-to-4. DiFranco said she would have voted in favor of the motion, had it set a strict deadline on when the city would file an application.

DiFranco then presented the second failed motion, asking commissioners to file an application this fall during the next batching cycle. That failed 2-to-3, with Yates saying she would have supported it had it stipulated that the city must have found a hospital partner before applying.

When the third motion passed, DiFranco said she was "shocked" and "baffled."

"I didn't think it would at all go this direction," she said. "As a city, we're not growing in the right direction."

Both she and Cook alleged that the decision would benefit private interest groups and the motion needed more scrutiny.

Two former city commissioners in the audience agreed it was the wrong decision to make.

"They ignored the citizens," Fred Tower III said.

"I think what you've seen today is politics at its worst," Jim Blucher said. "You've seen some people who dislike each other and vote against each other because of that, and it certainly did not help the city of North Port."

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