

BU study contends new Worcester hospital unnecessary

State board expected to issue license

By Larry Tye
GLOBE STAFF

A state board is expected to sign off today on a license to build the \$215 million Medical City hospital complex in Worcester, even though state officials say they agree with a new study from Boston University that found the city already has far too many hospital beds.

Opening Medical City, the BU authors add, would almost certainly force the closing or drastic downsizing of one of two other relatively new hospitals in Worcester.

Even so, analysts say the license will be approved because the state has OK'd so many other hospitals that weren't needed that it would be

unfair to say no to the Worcester project, especially since it is the centerpiece of the city's downtown development plan. The project was given a green light three years ago by the same board, and state officials aren't sure they have the power to stop it now, when they're being asked to transfer that approval to the firm buying the one that planned to build Medical City.

"Medical City is going to be a white elephant," said Alan Sager, a professor at the BU School of Public Health and an author of the new study. "It's time for us all to agree to shout together that this emperor has no clothes, instead of everyone conceding that point privately" but publicly saying nothing can be done.

"Given the changing climate, there's probably some truth to that," Public Health Commissioner David Mulligan said of Sager's contention that Worcester already has too many hospital beds. "The Public Health Council could vote against it, but personally I don't think that would

be fair. These folks have gone through a fair process that began years ago, and they have a right to go forward."

A final decision is expected this morning by the Public Health Council, which Mulligan chairs and which is charged with determining the need for new hospitals. In 1994, the council approved Fallon Healthcare System's plan to build the 299-bed Medical City to replace St. Vincent Hospital, and last year it approved the transfer of that approval to OrNda HealthCorp of Tennessee, a for-profit chain that bought St. Vincent. Today the council will decide whether to transfer the approval again, this time to Tenet Healthcare Corp., which is buying OrNda.

Sager argues that regardless of previous decisions, it is clear now that Medical City isn't needed. He based his conclusion on another recent study of six cities nationwide, including Worcester, which found that Worcester residents use hospitals 65 percent more often, on aver-

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age, than residents of the other cities. When the managed care forces at work in the other cities come to Massachusetts, which Sager says is inevitable, Worcester residents will have to cut back on hospital visits and the city will have nearly 500 more beds than it can use, even after St. Vincent closes.

"Medical City's harm would not be limited to the project and its backers," the study concludes. If it is built, it could force the closing of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center or Memorial Hospital, or the

merging of those two facilities, the BU authors and other analysts say.

If the Public Health Council decides it can't so "no," Sager says, the Legislature should intervene to stop Medical City.

Nancy Kane, a hospital expert at the Harvard School of Public Health, agrees that "it's kind of crazy" to go ahead with Medical City given that the beds won't be needed. But she added, "I see why at this point it would be very hard to make an example of a hospital someone wants to build in Worcester, given what we've

allowed in Boston. The local politics there would be fierce."

For its part, Tenet says it expects to complete its takeover of OrNda later this week and to break ground at Medical City next month. "Medical City has already been approved twice. The facts, the need and the project scope remain the same," company spokeswoman Diana Takvam said yesterday.

One factor that will make it easier to approve the change in ownership is that Tenet has agreed to stand by a commitment OrNda made last year to provide indefinitely the same level of free care to the poor that St. Vincent offered.

The Public Health Council tomorrow is expected to begin amending its rules to require all companies that take over Massachusetts hospitals to continue the level of free care provided by the previous owner. State regulations now require only a two-year commitment on free care.

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