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Hospital merger concerns growing

Directors of Scarborough's two hospitals have approved an agreement to create what they hope will be a better, more powerful institution, but they know they are running short of time.

Rouge Valley Health System and The Scarborough Hospital were ordered last March to study a merger, and by last November their top officials and boards were convinced a merger should happen.

But the hospital boards also decided – and did again in separate meetings this week – the merger should be done only if the province fulfills certain conditions, which still haven't been met.

One of these is covering what the merger will cost, now estimated at \$32.4 million.

The hospitals, by their own admission, have “very large working funds deficits” and poor ability to borrow, while projected savings from the merger are only in the range of \$7.6-9.6 million over three years.

Even more crucial, judging by the attention it has lately received, is the hospitals' request that the province show “support for capital planning” by approving longterm studies for possible new hospital facilities in Scarborough and West Durham.

Without these studies, a merged hospital, even though it begins as Ontario's seventh largest, faces a future with three aging Scarborough campuses “at capacity and unable to accommodate increasing workload” which are “not configured for efficient clinical services.”

The boards, locked into a timetable so that the hospitals can bring the merger request to the province's Central East Local Health Integration Network on March 26 will vote on final approval for the merger next Saturday, March 15.

So far, TSH directors were told Tuesday, the province hasn't formally replied to the



Staff photo/MIKE ADLER

The Scarborough Chinese Outreach Committee recently held a press conference in support of merging Scarborough two healthcare systems, The Scarborough Hospital and Rouge Valley Health System, into one.

requests for money, and most of the informal replies have been negative.

Approval of the planning studies, which the hospitals requested January 22 in a pre-capital submission, hasn't come either.

Spokespersons at the ministry this week said the hospitals could expect a response sometime this spring – the same as saying it may come between late March and mid-June.

CEOs of both hospitals this week refused to say what would happen if their boards are forced to vote on the merger without the promises they wanted.

“I can't pre-suppose at this time what the board's decision will be,” said Robert Biron of TSH.

Rouge Valley's CEO Rik Ganderton said the government understands the timetable. “The board will have to take into account whatever they have or have not heard,” he said.

Both also would not specu-

late on what will happen to the merger, which Ontario Health Minister Deb Matthews would have 30 days to approve following the LHIN meeting, if a provincial election is called before she makes a decision.

“If they can't get their heads around this, we are going to do everything we can to make sure someone else gets elected next time.”

– Dr. Robert Ting, Scarborough Chinese Outreach Committee

On Tuesday, the TSH board's chairperson Stephen Smith said the province at least continues to listen to the hospitals as the final decisions approach.

He also welcomed news that six Liberal MPPs from the area had written to Matthews,

stressing a fast decision on the planning studies is critical.

The MPPs told Matthews they support a planning exercise, believing “it will improve efficiency, is evidence based, and will meet the needs of our diverse and growing community.”

Approving the hospitals' requests will also help reinforce staff and community support for the merger, they added.

And while telling residents to “take a deep breath here” and realize governments don't make important decisions in haste, Scarborough Centre MPP Brad Duguid assured residents local Liberals had heard them when they “spoke loud and clear” last summer in favour of a Bloor-Danforth subway extension.

“They put themselves on the line, fought for it, and won,” Duguid said in an interview last week.

“We're going to win this too.”

The Ontario Health Coalition, which speaks for

hospital's employees, urged the MPPs this week “to take a more responsible position on this issue” and not to “rush” a merger proposal through.

“The bottom line is that the merger plan does not save any money, nor does it protect health services for people in your riding,” the group told Duguid and the others in a letter signed by its executive director, Natalie Mehra.

The group said it had already seen significant cuts to health services in Scarborough and West Durham and was afraid of more. “We are deeply concerned about the costs of the merger, which will place competing demands on scarce health care funding, siphoning money away from patient care.”

Last Wednesday, the Scarborough Chinese Outreach Committee, which has raised money over two decades for health care in the area, warned there would be political consequences if the Liberal government doesn't

spend the millions necessary to plan new hospital facilities for the area.

Executives of the fund-raising group called a press conference to express support for the merger, but spent most of it stressing hospital campuses in Scarborough and West Durham are in desperate need of major reinvestment or replacement.

“They've had ample time to look at this,” Dr. Robert Ting, the committee's chairperson, said of Scarborough's six Liberal MPPs.

“If they can't get their heads around this, we are going to do everything we can to make sure someone else gets elected next time.”

Dr. Paul Tam, a COC vice president, recalled it took him 14 years to create the first dialysis unit for TSH, consisting of five beds. The unit has grown to serve more than a million residents.

“We are good immigrants. We vote for the party who got us here. But we should also vote for the party that (will) get us to the next step,” he said.

“It takes 10 years to do anything, so if we don't start today, your grandchildren may not get anything.”

After the final board votes, special meetings will be called – on March 17 for TSH and March 18 for RVHS to give members of the hospital corporations a chance to approve the merger. Members include not just directors but life members, annual members, auxiliaries, and in Rouge Valley's case, a large number of donors.

Despite hopes for the creation of new hospital facilities in the long run, the hospitals have pledged no campus or emergency room will close after a new hospital – temporarily to be called the Scarborough and West Durham Health System – is created.

The hospitals provide information on the merger on a shared website, www.leadingforpatients.ca

For more on the merger of the hospitals, please go to bit.ly/1hHt12