

Scarborough hospital merger proposal Saturday voting deadline nears

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The Scarborough Hospital and Rouge Valley Health System are finally ready for final votes on a merger, but unless good news arrives by Friday, part of that decision to merge becomes a leap into the dark.

The province has this long to tell the hospital boards, voting separately on Saturday morning, what they've waited to hear: that it will pay at least part of the merger costs and fund long-term planning, which could replace their aging and inadequate facilities with new ones in Scarborough and West Durham.

By press time Wednesday, there was no word.

Tensions about the final votes - which are to be confirmed by each hospital's corporate members early next week - can be seen in the differences between two letters, both of which are signed by the presidents of the hospital medical associations.

The first letter, released by the hospital administrations and also signed by their chiefs of medical staff, concentrates on the benefits of a merger, saying it "would allow us to improve the delivery of health care as well as streamline patient care for residents in the region."

Though it mentions the merger "is also contingent" upon the hospitals being paid the associated costs, as well as funds to plan capital investment, this letter closes by saying the medical leadership is excited about opportunities a merger

brings.

The second letter, sent privately to the hospital boards and signed by six present and past medical staff association executives after a joint meeting last month, has a different tone.

In it, the physicians note the merger "would come at great expense to the hospitals" - now estimated at \$32.4 million - and say they hope those expenses won't be funded by clinical service cuts if the province refuses to pay.

"A successful long-term

“We are not going to cut key services, and the merger is not going to cause key services to be cut.

- Dr. Naresh Mohan, chief of staff, Rouge Valley

merger becomes that much more difficult if patient services are not protected in the short-term," the letter says, adding the medical societies "can only be truly supportive of this merger" if the province commits to a long-term planning exercise, similar to one recently promised hospitals in Niagara Region, that could lead to updating or rebuilding the hospital facilities.

"Anything less would represent a betrayal of our commitments to our patients and the communities we serve, and put at risk the programs that deliver patient care," the letter concludes.

The medical societies' letter prompted an exchange in Ontario Legislature on March 5 between Health Minister

Deb Matthews and New Democratic Party Health Critic France Gelinas, who read out parts of it and said the physicians were saying "quality of care is threatened" by the merger.

Matthews denied this, arguing the merger "is all about providing better care closer to home for the people of Scarborough," and adding she was "very pleased to know that increasingly there is community support for this kind of change."

CEOs of both hospitals have told the ministry they must get word on their two stated conditions by March 14 - that is, Friday - in order for both boards to make their final decisions Saturday.

But the only answer from Queen's Park so far is the hospitals can expect to hear a response on capital planning grants sometime in the spring.

At a board meeting last week, TSH chair Stephen Smith said each category of merger expense was part of a "process of negotiation" with the ministry, but suggested after some informal responses there was still hope of receiving \$5.4 million. "We knew we weren't necessarily going to be successful in all these line items," he conceded.

It's not clear what will happen if one of the boards or members of the hospital corporations - meeting in the evening for votes Monday, March 17 at the RVHS Centenary campus and Tuesday, March 18 at the TSH General - should refuse to approve the merger.

Both hospital CEOs have

repeatedly said the status quo is "not an option" for the hospitals, since rising costs and the need for greater efficiencies leave them little choice except to join forces.

The region's health authority, the Central East Local Health Integration Network (LHIN), ordered TSH and RVHS to study some form of integration a year ago, and could order a new study, perhaps this time proposing integration on another level.

Last week, Dr. Naresh

“Scarborough's been the poor cousin of the poor cousin most of the time.

- NDP health critic France Gelinas

Mohan, Rouge Valley's chief of staff, said whether the boards and members should support the merger without securing the promises each hospital seeks is "an extremely difficult question to answer."

Members in that situation would have to decide whether the merger's merits, such as the benefits of better co-operation between the hospitals, are enough, he said.

"We are not going to cut key services, and the merger is not going to cause key services to be cut."

The decisions of the coming days will be sent to the LHIN, which will announce its own recommendation March 26.

It would then be up to Matthews to approve a merger within 30 days.

The motions passed

by the boards earlier this month contain an escape clause, however, stating the directors of each hospital "may abandon the application without further approval of the members of the corporation at any time prior to the amalgamation becoming effective."

A second unknown for the hospitals is what happens if a provincial election campaign, expected to be called within weeks, starts before the minister makes up her mind. The CEOs have said they don't know, in such a case, what happens to their merger request.

In an interview, Gelinas said Scarborough's hospitals need to be updated. "Scarborough's been the poor cousin of the poor cousin most of the time," she said, adding she isn't necessarily opposed to hospital mergers. "Some of them have been nightmare and some of them have produced good results."

Moving health-care services out of hospitals and into the community, one of Matthews' aims, must still guarantee access to care based on patient need, not ability to pay, and "the hospital is always the back-up safety net" for this principle, Gelinas said.

Though they've asked the province to plan for what could become new hospital campuses, the hospitals say they would keep all four existing campuses and their emergency rooms operating after a merger, "until such a time new hospital building are approved, constructed and open."

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Doctors say Scarborough hospital merger will benefit patients

Re: Scarborough Hospital merger, News, March 6.

To the editor:

We, the medical leadership, believe the proposed merger between The Scarborough Hospital (TSH) and Rouge Valley Health System (RVHS) would benefit both patients and physicians.

As two organizations serving the same communities, TSH and RVHS are well-positioned to develop a unified strategy for the delivery of health-care services in Scarborough and west Durham — one which would allow us to improve the delivery of health care as well as streamline patient care for residents in the region.

We recognize this process may cause concern for patients, physicians and staff, but want to assure you this merger is focused on delivering sustainable

health services well into the future.

The merger is also contingent upon the hospitals receiving the capital investment necessary to fund the changes that a merger will bring, as well as the costs associated with merging.

Securing funding to modernize our facilities will enable us to improve care by investing in the hospital equipment, facility renovations and staff resources required to make the merger a success.

Importantly, this merger will also allow us to make the organization an even better place to work.

Merging our hospital systems will allow us to pool our resources from all sites, enabling us to share best practices and coordinate the delivery of services between hospitals. The benefits will include the ability to accommodate larger on-call groups,

ensure we can provide an even higher level of patient care; and in the long term, we will be able to establish Centres of Excellence and first-class regional programs.

We are excited about the opportunities that this merger presents, and are working closely with the leadership at both hospitals to ensure that the merger process remains transparent, accountable and in the best interests of our patients.

Dr. Tom Chan,
chief of staff,
The Scarborough Hospital
Dr. Elaine Yeung,
president, Medical Staff Association,
The Scarborough Hospital
Dr. Naresh Mohan,
chief of staff, Rouge Valley Health System
Dr. Henry Huang,
president, Medical Staff Society, Rouge Valley Health System

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