



News

LYNN RESIDENTS SPEAK OUT AGAINST CLOSING UNION HOSPITAL

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By THOMAS GRILLO

LYNN — The decision to close Union Hospital was made long ago, but residents who filled the Franco American War Veterans Hall Thursday weren't having it.

"There are vulnerable seniors and citizens in Lynn who have horror stories about waiting in emergency room hallways at the North Shore Medical Center (NSMC) in Salem waiting to be seen for hours," said Kathy Paul of the Massachusetts Senior Action Council. "We are talking about human lives that are at stake right now."

Dr. David J. Roberts, NSMC's president, was in the hot seat as residents, mostly seniors, chided him for what they perceive as abandoning Lynn residents who need emergency care.

He was joined by the Urgent/Emergent Care Planning Group to present data on ER use and offer options for the future of emergency care in the city. Many members of the 17-member committee comprised of public officials and hospital staff were on hand to hear the community's will.

Roberts began the session hoping to win the crowd over by offering statistics. He said of the 24,306 patients who were seen in the hospital's ER in 2015, only 3,400 needed critical care such as treatment for a heart attack or a stroke. About 31 percent of the patients could have been seen at so-called Minute Clinics operated by retailers for complaints such as sore throats, he said.

Last year, the Department of Public Health approved a \$180 million expansion of North Shore Medical Center that will close Union and move the beds to a new Salem campus in 2019. The medical facilities in Lynn and Salem are a part of Partners HealthCare.

"The idea was to build a large emergency room big enough to accommodate all of the acute ER care that had been delivered previously at the Union and Salem emergency rooms," Roberts said.

The committee has discussed three options to serve the community following the shuttering of Union, including offering a satellite treatment facility outside of a hospital, an urgent care center and walk-in clinics.

But Paul pleaded with Roberts to keep Union Hospital open until the NSMC is ready to serve them in Salem.

"When you go to a hospital you need to know you will be served now and you can't do that," she said.

Leslie Greenberg, chairwoman of the Lynn Health Task Force, agreed.

"Very few people in this room think a city of 92,000 should be without any hospital," she said as the crowd applauded. "We still believe the decision to close Union Hospital is bad for the local economy, bad for the employees and bad for the health of Lynn's residents."

Roger McCarthy said his life was saved by doctors at Union Hospital and asked that the facility stay open with a 24-hour, fully staffed ER.

"If it wasn't for the care I received there, I wouldn't be here tonight," he said.

If Roberts expected some support from Debra Lou Stevens, a Union Hospital nurse, he may have been disappointed. She

was greeted with applause when she approached the podium.

"I'm sure you can imagine how difficult and painful it's been for all of us to accept the news that Union Hospital is closing," she said. "But it's even more challenging when changes are made in a haphazard, piecemeal way without full transparency and communication with the hospital community. I blame that on the Partners HealthCare organization all together."

She cited the closure and consolidations of several units and the layoff of nearly 200 employees at the Union and Salem campuses.

"We hear about the low occupancy and problems leading to these changes after the fact, when the hospital has already chosen a course of action and doesn't ask for anyone's opinion for any of it," Stevens said.

The evening began with welcome remarks from Sen. Thomas M. McGee (D-Lynn) and Mayor Judith Flanagan Kennedy. The two are facing each other in the race for mayor.

"This really is a dialogue," McGee said. "It's important that the input from the community tonight is ongoing. We will hear a presentation from the working group and learn what that information means and what we, as a community, will do going forward as we address the changes that will happen in Lynn and more importantly how we can continue to provide service in Lynn."

Kennedy said the committee has been working for more than four years with Partners trying to ensure that the consolidation of Union Hospital and Salem will result in quality ER services for the city.

"We have a good understanding of the thinking behind what Partners is proposing," she said. "But we just want to make sure that everyone who is need of emergency treatment in Lynn is still going to be able to get that treatment in a timely manner."

Ward 1 City Councilor Wayne Lozzi said Partners must tell Lynn residents about the plans for Union Hospital.

"This plan should provide sufficient detail regarding what services it will maintain, what services will be built, and what services will close," he said. "Partners must show that it will maintain a level of service to the people of Lynn, while different in some ways, will be at least equal in terms of value."

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