

June 2 2010

Westchester officials clash over privatizing jail health care

WHITE PLAINS — Westchester lawmakers voted Tuesday to let the Westchester Medical Center continue to treat county jail inmates through the end of the year, accepting the hospital's reversal of its earlier decision to stop providing the service on July 26.

But there's a hitch: Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino said it's too late. Astorino said he had already found a replacement for the Valhalla hospital, agreeing to a three-year, \$45 million deal last week with a private company that will pick up the service July 27.

"As far as I'm concerned we're proceeding as is," the first-term county executive said. "The contract will be signed with a solid company that will come in and provide health care for prisoners at a million dollars a year less.

"If the board would like to spend — as evidently they do — \$3 million more for health care of prisoners, they're going to have to defend that, specially in this day and age where we just have no more money," Astorino said. "We're broke."

The impasse is the latest political feud between the Republican county executive and the heavily Democratic Board of Legislators. Democrats on the board want the county to go through a public bidding process before deciding on the ultimate replacement for the medical center.

The board's Democratic majority said Tuesday that legislators — and taxpayers — needed to play a larger role in the process.

"I think what is being stated is, A, we've been blindsided, and, B, we've been taken for fools, possibly," said county Legislator Judy Myers, D-Mamaroneck.

"I'm wondering if there is not a phantom Board of Legislators that we don't know about that has been in negotiations all along with our administration," Myers said. "Because from where I stand, this is the Board of Legislators, and this has not come before us."

Board Democrats complained that too many questions remained over Astorino's deal with Correct Care Solutions, based in Nashville, Tenn. The contract offers the county indemnification from lawsuits, but legislators said the financial stability of CCS' new New York affiliate remains unclear.

The size of the contract warrants more scrutiny and in a more public forum, they said.

"Let me start by saying I object to sending \$45 million of Westchester taxpayer moneys to a Tennessee corporation with a checkered past and give up 75 jobs that belong here in Westchester County," said Legislator Tom Abinanti, D-Greenburgh. "These jobs belong in the medical center."

Correct Care Solutions, one of the nation's largest prison-care providers, has been named in 140 federal lawsuits since 2004, a review of records found.

Astorino said the county board was kept abreast of his search for a replacement inmate-care provider. He said the Valhalla hospital left the county little option after a Jan. 27 letter from medical center CEO Michael Israel, who said the county's decision to cut

\$12.5 million in funding and services to the hospital made it financially impossible to continue providing inmate health care.

Then on May 28 Israel again wrote the county, this time withdrawing his Jan. 27 request to terminate the contract "after numerous discussions with members of the Westchester County Board of Legislators." He asked to complete the contract with the county, which expires Dec. 31.

Republican legislators, however, argued that Israel's earlier termination request was legally binding. "I think really when you look at it that Michael Israel played chicken with the County Executive's Office and this board, tried to negotiate with this board a better deal and couldn't," said Legislator Gordon Burrows, R-Yonkers.

With 12 legislators present Tuesday, the board voted 10-2 along party lines to accept Israel's reversal of his January decision to terminate the medical center's contract with the county in July.

The board voted the same way on a second resolution, which asked county Correction Commissioner Kevin Cheverko to seek public bids to find a new health-care provider for the jail.

"I can veto it, they can try to override it," Astorino said. "For what? To go out and do something we've already done the past six months? It's an exercise in futility."

Editor's note: The quote from Legislator Gordon Burrows was incorrectly attributed to another legislator in an earlier version of this article.