

NIU gets state OK to build cancer treatment center

By Mike Colias

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(Crain's) — State health regulators on Tuesday approved Northern Illinois University's proposal to build a massive radiation treatment center in West Chicago.

The Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board's approval allows NIU to start work on the \$160-million facility, which would include a linear accelerator that produces proton beams to zap cancerous tumors. It's expected to open within two years.

NIU officials also confirmed that doctors affiliated with Northwestern Memorial Hospital will oversee patient care at the facility under a tentative agreement that the school expects to finalize within three months.

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Proton therapy is an alternative form of conventional, X-ray-based radiation treatment. It delivers a more-precise beam to cancerous tumors, avoiding healthy tissue and organs that routine radiation can harm.

NIU eventually expects to treat 1,500 cancer patients a year at the facility, where it also will conduct research and train physicists, radiation therapists and other clinical personnel needed to administer the therapy.

"This gives us a platform to expand our research efforts in physics, biology and engineering," NIU President John Peters said after the board's vote. "We can start talking about how we develop the next phase of proton therapy and how we improve the technology."

There are only five proton therapy centers operating nationally and a few more being built. But the western suburbs could have two: Central DuPage Hospital has plans for a \$125-million facility in Warrenville. The planning board is expected to consider that proposal in April.
