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State planners to hear proposal for NIU's proton cancer research center

By Jonathan Bilyk - Chronicle News Group

Northern Illinois University hopes to get a green light from state planners this week for its plan to bring a new option for cancer treatment to the region.

Representatives of NIU will go before the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board on Tuesday for a hearing on the university's request to build its proposed Northern Illinois Proton Treatment and Research Center.

The treatment and research center is proposed to be the first-of-its-kind in the upper Midwest, using a proton accelerator to treat a variety of cancers. The center would be built in the DuPage National Technology Park in West Chicago contiguous to the northern boundary of Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, which in the late 1980s developed the first proton-therapy accelerator for use in cancer treatment, according to the proton treatment and research center's Web site.

Proton therapy is a non-invasive, painless and effective form of radiation treatment that uses proton beams to treat cancer, according to the center's Web site. The treatment allows doctors to more precisely target tumors without destroying surrounding healthy tissue, according to the Web site, but is currently unavailable in Illinois.

But the planning board also is reviewing plans for a proton therapy center proposed by Central DuPage Hospital in Winfield and its partner, Bloomington, Ind.-based ProCure Treatment Centers.

CDH and ProCure have requested the health planning board grant them a certificate of need, which would allow them to build their proton therapy center in Warrenville. The planning board has scheduled a hearing on that proposal March 6 in Warrenville.

Both NIU and CDH have objected to their rivals' proposals.

John Lewis, associate vice-president for Northern Illinois University Outreach, said NIU believes the planning board will need to choose between the two proposals.

"They (CDH and ProCure) make the argument that there is a sufficient number of patients in this market to warrant two of these facilities," Lewis said. "But we think the market for proton therapy will take time to build to the level of sophistication that can support more than one of these accelerators."

Lewis admitted it is a complex topic that the state board will need to sort.

"Our hope is the board reviews our certificate of exemption requirement and agrees that it meets all the requirements," Lewis said. "But Tuesday, this will all start getting ironed out."

Preliminary plans for the Northern Illinois Proton Treatment and Research Center show four separate treatment rooms in a 130,000-square-foot building on about 13 acres, according to the proton centers Web site. NIU officials said late last year they hope to begin construction on the \$160 million project during the spring of 2008.

NIU filed a request last year for a certificate of exemption, which would mean the facility, because it is operated by an academic institution, would not be subject to the same regulations applied to private medical facilities.

Kane County Chronicle Reporter Jonathan Bilyk can be reached at jbilyk@kcchronicle.com.

If you go

The Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board will hold a hearing about the proposed Northern Illinois Proton Treatment and Research Center on Tuesday at 9 a.m. at the Hilton Garden Inn, 10 E. Grand Ave. in Chicago.

On the Net

Northern Illinois Proton Treatment and Research Center, <http://www.niu.edu/protontherapy/>

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