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NIU proton center wins state OK

By Jonathan Bilyk - Chronicle News Group

CHICAGO - State regulators have given a green light to Northern Illinois University's plans to build a \$160 million proton therapy cancer treatment center just east of Geneva.

The Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board on Tuesday granted NIU a certificate of exemption, giving the university permission to begin work on its proposed Northern Illinois Proton Treatment and Research Center.

Proton therapy is a noninvasive, painless and effective form of radiation treatment that uses proton beams to treat cancer, according to the center's Web site.

The certificate exempts NIU, because it is an academic institution, from having to submit its project to the more stringent requirements of the state's certificate-of-need review process.

That process would have required the university to prove, among other things, that a need exists in the state for the kinds of services the proposed facility would offer and that financing for the project was available at the time of application.

NIU representatives welcomed the decision with visible relief.

John Lewis, NIU's associate vice president for outreach and the cancer center's project manager, said the board's decision would allow NIU to issue bonds to finance much of the project.

Although the planning board unanimously approved NIU's exemption, several board members did so while voicing strong reservations over NIU's ability to complete the project on budget and within 24 months, as is required by law for facilities being built under a certificate of exemption.

Planning board members noted that NIU's proton center is the first facility costing more than \$1 million to ever be granted a certificate of exemption in Illinois.

Board members also questioned whether NIU had opted to pursue a certificate of exemption - rather than the more traditional certificate of need - to gain "a strategic advantage" over a similar facility that has been proposed by Central DuPage Hospital in Winfield and its partner, Bloomington, Ind.-based ProCure Treatment Centers.

That project, for which CDH has requested a certificate of need, is under review by the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board and will receive a public hearing March 5 in Warrenville.

NIU representatives, however, denied any attempts to seek an advantage in the review process.

"This was not Machiavellian on our part, I assure you," NIU Board of Trustees Chairwoman Cherilyn Murer said.

Murer, Lewis and other NIU representatives said the university could secure the funding, complete construction and begin treating patients at its proton therapy center within 24 months.

Since the university met all the requirements to receive the exemption, board members had little choice but to approve it, they said.

However, the board did require NIU to submit quarterly status reports on the construction progress and the project's budget.

The NIU 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 Technology Park in West Chicago, contiguous to the northern boundary of Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia.

With the CDH proposal set to be discussed next week, NIU officials will discuss what stance the university will take regarding that proposal, Lewis said.

CDH Executive Vice President Jim Spear applauded the planning board's decision, saying NIU's project would help fill the demand for proton therapy in the region.

He said CDH did not believe that the decision would prevent it from securing its permit from the board.

"We think there is a great demand for this service," Spear said. "And we think there is room for more than one."

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