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Somerset hospital to unveil growth plan

Planners seek the entire proposal to address neighbors' concerns

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STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Somerset Medical Center will present its conceptual expansion plan to the Somerville Planning Board tonight, responding to requests from residents and the board to see the entire proposal before any plan is approved, officials said.

The \$100 million expansion plan has been in the works for two years and has stirred up significant opposition from residents. It will consist of a new cancer center, two new levels on the current parking garage, a new emergency department/inpatient floor and a four-story parking garage.

"This meeting is for us to present the overview of what we have planned for the future," said Sharon Holdswade, senior vice president and chief operating officer for the Somerset Medical Center.

Hospital officials met three times with citizens beginning last November and officially presented their plans to the planning board in February.

The site plans for the regional cancer center and the addition of two levels to the garage have been completed and will be subject for review by the planning board on July 24. Site plans for the emergency department/inpatient floor and new parking garage have not yet been presented to the planning board.

"We are addressing a community need by expanding our services in this area, which has seen a tremendous amount of growth," Holdswade said.

Neighbors are concerned the growth of the hospital will destroy their quality of life.

"Increased traffic, the safety of our children and light, noise and air pollution is a major concern to us," said Nancy Hahn, who lives on Van Buren Street. She said there will be a parking garage at the end of her street if the plan is approved.

"They're trying to create one of the best 100 teaching colleges in the United States," Hahn said, "but a town of under 12,000 people can't handle that type of facility."

Hospital officials insist that they care about their neighbors and the community. "There are no more property purchases necessary for the conceptual plan because we're building up instead of out," Holdswade said.

The medical center is also moving its finance and information services departments off-site and recently rented space at the Somerset Patriots' ballpark for outpatient rehabilitation.

Neighbors remain wary of the hospital's intentions, especially because they own 14 residential properties adjacent to the hospital on five different streets.

Don Streepy, who built his Jefferson Street house in 1962, said there has always been a lack of trust between residents in the area and the hospital.

"They have expanded too far and have completely surrounded us," he said. "We're happy that the planning board is making them give an entire conceptual plan for the expansion instead of the nickel-and-dime proposals that they have presented in the past."

The neighborhood is protected by a hospital zone, which prohibits the medical center from expanding beyond Grant, Rehill, Post and Lincoln avenues, said Bernie Navatto, chairman of the Somerville Planning Board.

"The residents have a lot of valid concerns and our job is to balance the residents' concerns and the hospital's concerns, and that is always hard," he said.