

NIU gets OK to build proton cancer center

By Jack Komperda

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Illinois regulators gave Northern Illinois University the go-ahead Tuesday to pursue construction of the state's first proton therapy cancer treatment center in West Chicago.

Members of the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board, however, noted concerns over whether the university could finish the project within two years -- a key requirement of the approval process -- and questioned whether NIU could secure funding for the nearly \$160 million cancer center.

Both NIU and Central DuPage Hospital in Winfield had been rushing to be the first to get state approval to construct similar treatment centers in the Western suburbs.

Only five such facilities, which use proton beams rather than standard radiation to treat a variety of cancers, exist in the country.

NIU filed with the state agency last year for a certificate of exemption, which means the facility, because it is operated by an academic institution, wouldn't be subject to the same regulations applied to private medical facilities.

The filing also ensured NIU would be the first to present its case before the state agency, members of the state planning board said.

To allay fears over whether NIU could complete the project on time and within budget, school officials offered to provide the state agency with quarterly reports on its building progress.

"We believe in accountability," NIU board Chairman Cheryl Murer told the state planning board. "We do not expect to come back and say there are cost overruns."

John Lewis, an associate vice president of NIU and the cancer center's project manager, said the university hasn't set a date to break ground on the facility, which would be located within the **DuPage National Technology Park** on Roosevelt Road and Fayban Parkway.

Over the next several months, the university will finalize its financing on the project. Lewis said NIU so far has about \$15 million to \$20 million in secured funding for the center.

Several executives from Central DuPage Hospital attended Tuesday morning's hearing, including CEO Luke McGuinness and Vice President Jim Spear.

Spear congratulated NIU officials, who oppose the proposed CDH proton therapy center, for gaining state approval.

"I think it's a good day for the people of Illinois," Spear said. "I'm quite certain Chicago can support more than one of these sorts of facilities. Certainly, we'd like to be either the first or the second to be able to offer these services."

Lewis said NIU officials will meet in the next few days to formalize a position concerning the proposed Central DuPage proton cancer therapy center.

The Winfield hospital is hoping to build a \$125 million proton center within Warrenville's Cantera development.

Hospital officials said the proposed center could be used to treat, at its peak, up to 1,500 patients a year.

NIU officials had accused Central DuPage of pursuing the project as a profit-seeking venture.

Murer, the NIU board chairman, declined comment on the university's position concerning the Central DuPage hospital project.

A public hearing on the Central DuPage project is scheduled for 9 a.m. March 5 at Warrenville city hall, 28W701 Stafford Place.