

The Beacon-News

From Kendall County, how close is the ER?

Rush-Copley continues drive for new center in Kendall

October 4, 2009

By CHRISTINE S. MOYER

Years of unprecedented growth have brought new schools, new stores and new streets to Kendall County. Somehow though, health care was largely overlooked, leaving Kendall — although among the fastest-growing counties in the nation — without a hospital or emergency care center. Many Kendall residents travel more than 12 miles to treat broken bones, chest pain and children burning up with fever in the middle of the night.

Rush-Copley Medical Center wants to make emergency care more accessible for Kendall County residents who now drive to the Aurora hospital for treatment. Rush-Copley has proposed constructing a freestanding emergency center on West Veterans Parkway (Route 34) in Yorkville adjacent to its Health Care Center, which is an outpatient care facility. The site is about 10 miles east of Valley West Community Hospital in Sandwich.

The proposed center would be staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and would provide emergency care for all patients except those needing the most critical, life-saving treatment. These patients would be transported to Rush-Copley's emergency department in Aurora or another appropriate center of care.

Effect on others

The ultimate question is whether this center — intended to help Kendall residents and Rush-Copley's crowded emergency department — will hurt nearby hospitals. At least one of those hospitals believes it will be negatively affected. Rush-Copley leaders reject those predictions. And the Illinois Health Facilities and Services Review Board is split on the issue.

In early September, the board voted 2-1 in favor of the proposed emergency center, resulting in an intent to deny ruling. A unanimous vote is needed for approval. This means Rush-Copley has a second chance to address the board's concerns at a meeting slated for December or January. However, should the board again fail to agree on the proposal, the freestanding emergency center will be denied, said Kelly Jakubek, communications manager for the Illinois Department of Public Health.

ER overcrowded now

That's an exhausting thought for Rush-Copley leaders who have been involved in the process for almost a year. "We have an overcrowded emergency department," Gail Bumgarner, senior vice president at Rush-Copley, told the state health board, according to a transcript from the September meeting.

"We're looking to alleviate that congestion and the least expensive way to do it, the most cost-effective way to do it, is to build a (freestanding emergency center) in Yorkville," Bumgarner said. Rush-Copley leaders estimate expanding the hospital's current emergency department in Aurora would cost around \$2 million more than constructing the \$7.5 million Yorkville center. Bumgarner appealed to the board, "... please don't make us spend \$2 million more than we need to."

Emergency care lacking

A map of Kendall and its surrounding counties reveals the extent of this emergency-care hole. Full-service hospitals dot streets in DuPage, Kane and Will counties. Even in the more rural DeKalb County, hospitals rise up among cornfields. In Kendall County, emergency care centers are noticeably absent. This is a growing problem in the community, according to Linda Swanson, with the Kendall County Health Department.

"We definitely see a need in Kendall County for emergency services," said Swanson, assistant administrator for community health services. She said Kendall residents call the health department looking for medical help and staff has to direct them to hospitals outside the county. "These are people who are very sick," Swanson said. A local emergency department would also benefit Kendall residents without transportation and those who lost their insurance, Swanson said.

Valley West's reasoning

Leaders at Valley West Community Hospital in Sandwich — who oppose the proposed freestanding emergency center — don't dispute the absence of emergency care in Kendall. They do, however, insist that Kendall residents have plenty of options for urgent and emergency care across county borders. Valley West leaders point to the seven nearby hospitals in Aurora, Naperville, Joliet, Morris and, of course, Sandwich. They also highlight the county's urgent- and convenient-care centers in Yorkville, Oswego and Montgomery.

Rush-Copley's Bumgarner noted that the proposed freestanding emergency center will be able to treat a higher level of illness and injury than an urgent care center. The emergency center will also always be open and staffed, unlike its counterparts.

Bolstering Valley's West's argument is an Illinois Department of Public Health report, released in February, which found that there is no need for Rush-Copley's freestanding emergency center due largely to the three emergency departments located within 30 minutes of the proposed project: Valley West in Sandwich, and Rush-Copley and Provena Mercy Medical Center in Aurora.

State board divided

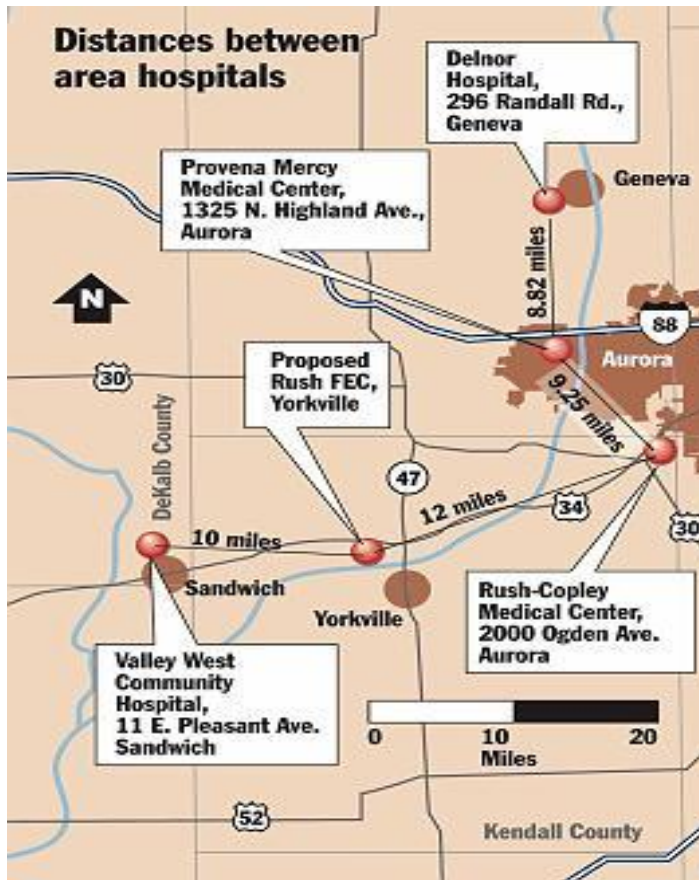
What matters most, though, is the decision of the state's three-member Health Facilities and Services Review Board. And this trio has not yet come to a consensus on the matter. In the forefront of board member Dr. James Burden's mind at the September meeting was duplicity of emergency services, according to a meeting transcript. "Really more than any of your wants, we have to be and are concerned about unnecessary duplication," Burden told Rush-Copley officials.

The February Department of Public Health report stated that Valley West is currently underutilized and noted the hospital's projected 15 to 25 percent reduction in emergency department visits with the construction of the freestanding emergency center. Rush-Copley denies any negative impact on the Sandwich hospital. Last year, 73 percent of the residents of Montgomery, Oswego and Yorkville who used an emergency department used Rush-Copley's emergency department in Aurora, according to hospital data.

Putting that figure into perspective, around 4 percent of the residents from that same area went to Valley West, according to Bumgarner. She said Rush-Copley projects 88 percent of its patient volume at the freestanding emergency center will come from those three towns. Board member Burden cast the lone vote against the project, stating his concerns about the duplicity of services. The two other Health Facilities and Services Review board members were swayed by Rush-Copley's emergency department congestion in Aurora to support the project.

Rush-Copley's emergency department patient data for the first six months of this year indicates that the hospital is on track to receive around 69,000 emergency visits by year's end. This would be a record for the hospital, according to Rush-Copley. Bumgarner remained discreet about how Rush-Copley will try to secure the board's unanimous support for its project this winter. Perhaps, she said, the hospital will be more clear about why constructing the freestanding emergency center is not a bad distribution of services. Or perhaps, Bumgarner said, Rush-Copley will more clearly describe the cost savings in building the emergency center over expanding the Aurora emergency department.

"We just need to make our case as strongly as possible," she said.



Kendall County is among the fastest-growing counties in the nation yet it has no hospital or emergency care center. Many residents must travel 12 miles or more to receive emergency care. Rush-Copley Medical Center wants to build a freestanding emergency center in Yorkville. (Beacon-News File)