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VA hospital decision process would be lengthy, Inglis says

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GREATER GREER NEWS

With support growing for the idea of converting Allen Bennett Memorial Hospital to a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs hospital once it's vacated, U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis said the decision won't be as easy as it might seem -- and it won't happen quickly.

Greenville Hospital System will relocate its Greer operations to the new Greer Memorial Hospital in mid-2008, making room for a new tenant at Allen Bennett.

Inglis said although factors such as the location and the facility's current setup for health-care uses would likely work in Greer's favor in trying to land a VA hospital, the process of assessing the site and the demand for care in the region would take years.

"The expected timetable is years, not months, to reach a decision on siting an inpatient facility, because it is a big decision that involves substantial resources," Inglis said.

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Paul Howell, constituent liaison with Inglis' office, said even the decision to open a new outpatient clinic in Spartanburg took several years.

VA officials must consider demand for services, which is greater for outpatient care than inpatient, and existing facilities, Inglis said. An outpatient clinic is already open in Greenville, and one is planned for Spartanburg.

Joe Baldwin, Greer's mayor pro tem, said it would make sense in this case for the process to go a little quicker since the initial expense of building or up-fitting the facility wouldn't be necessary.

"I think the thing the federal government needs to think about, and it may also speed the process up, is this place is already ready to go," Baldwin said.

He said a years-long decision-making process wouldn't be compatible with the city's goals for the property, which sits in a prominent location on Wade Hampton Boulevard.

"Somebody at the federal level's going to have to be showing some interest in it pretty quick, because if it's a years-and-years thing, it's just not going to come to pass, I don't think," Baldwin said. "We can't wait seven or eight years and let that thing just sit there."

State Sen. Lewis Vaughn recently met with Inglis along with leaders from local veterans groups to push for the veterans' hospital. He said if he were in a position where he had the ability to influence the decision, he would be doing everything he could, especially given that the site's availability won't last forever.

"This is a golden opportunity. It's not going to be there after next year, probably."

John Mansure, interim president of Allen Bennett, said that while the hospital system is open to working with the VA to convert the facility to a veterans' hospital, a drawn-out decision-making process may prevent that from happening.

"It depends on what other opportunities there may be out there for the use of the facility," Mansure said.

Inglis said another thing that may influence the VA's decision is how successful they are with a potential new initiative involving contracting with existing health-care facilities to provide veteran care, both inpatient and outpatient. He said he will attend a meeting between VA representatives and officials from local healthcare providers in December at which the concept will be addressed.

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