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The decision over whether to convert Greer's Allen Bennett Memorial Hospital to a U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs hospital isn't as cut-and-dried as it might seem, U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis said Monday.

State and local officials have been pushing the idea of opening a VA hospital in the facility on Wade Hampton Boulevard once Greenville Hospital System moves its operations to the new Greer Memorial Hospital, which should take place in mid-2008.

State Sen. Lewis Vaughn said the situation is "a golden opportunity" that would require little in the way of start-up investments because the facility is already outfitted for health-care use.

"I know in recent years (the VA has) been very, very reluctant to create new hospitals, but this is one that they can do with very little outlay up front," Vaughn said.

Advertisement But despite the hospital's prominent location and availability, Inglis said the VA will have to consider other factors in the decision.

With an outpatient clinic already located in Greenville and one planned for Spartanburg, Inglis said, the VA may question locating an additional facility -- albeit an inpatient care facility -- in Greer.

In addition, the demand for inpatient services is much lower than that for outpatient services, according to Inglis' constituent liaison, Paul Howell.

"The VA really has a high demand for outpatient service. That's why they're going to these community-based, outpatient clinics," Howell said.

But the fate of the hospital may depend upon the success of a new initiative of the VA that would seek to contract with existing health-care facilities to provide care to veterans, rather than constructing new, freestanding facilities devoted solely to veterans' care.

Inglis said that in December he will be part of a meeting that will include representatives from the VA and from major local health-care providers at which that concept will be addressed.

"That's something that we're currently working with the VA on, is trying to expand those options for veterans, which is something that I think makes a lot of sense," Inglis said.

For inpatient services, that might involve an existing hospital devoting one wing to veterans' care, so that it still has the atmosphere of a facility that serves only veterans, but takes advantage of what Inglis called "economies of scale."

Greenville County Council last week approved a resolution in support of the hospital's conversion to a veterans' facility.
