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Allen Bennett might change VA's mind about hospital

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Veterans, including John F. Collins, right, commander of Post 3 of the American Legion of Greenville, listen Friday as Veterans Administration representatives, Greenville Hospital System administrators and staff members of U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis discuss options for Allen Bennett

Memorial Hospital in Greer, at top.

While touring the entrance of Allen Bennett Memorial Hospital, Bill Quinton, the state commander for the Veterans Service Corps of South Carolina, shook his head incredulously.

"It makes no sense," he said. "This building, it's perfect. It would be a blessing for the 60,000-plus vets in the Upstate."

Quinton and a delegation of U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs representatives, Greenville Hospital System administrators and local elected officials examined the option of making the Allen Bennett facility a veterans hospital during a tour and panel discussion Friday.

The hospital system anticipates the facility will be vacant by next summer, when all of the hospital's services will transfer to the Greer Medical Campus on South Buncombe Road.

Some local veterans and Greer leaders are hoping Veterans Affairs officials will consider moving a VA hospital into the building. The nearest such hospitals are in Columbia and Asheville, N.C.

Larry Biro, director of the VA Southeast Network, said making a decision on whether to buy the hospital could take as little as nine months or as long as five years.

"There is already a plan for the Upstate area. It's to have another clinic and to expand the services in this area, and it doesn't have a plan for a hospital," Biro said. "For this to be happening, you have to be extremely optimistic; you have to reverse a plan. And we can't give any reason for that, other than this is a very beautiful facility."

The question VA officials must answer is whether the need for another hospital exists, especially since an outpatient facility for veterans operates out of Greenville and an outpatient branch is planned for Spartanburg.

Biro told many of the veterans who took the tour Friday that the VA had not purchased a hospital from the private sector since the end of World War II.

"The VA has more property than it knows what to do with," Biro explained. "There is no plan for new hospitals in this area. In fact, in all of the United States, there are only three new hospitals: one in Orlando, Fla., one in Denver, Colo., and Las Vegas."

One attendee asked whether Veterans Affairs would consider using the hospital if the Greenville Hospital System offered the Allen Bennett facility for free.

Biro said the VA would consider it, although he is not directly involved with purchasing or property acquisitions.

Brian Heckert, director of the William Jennings Bryan Dorn VA Medical Center in Columbia, said contracting specialty services for local veterans - such as ophthalmology, urology and dermatology - is in the works.

Sen. Lewis Vaughn, R-Greer, who along with Greer City Council has pushed for a veterans' hospital, said he was disappointed by VA leaders' response to the proposal.

"I didn't see a lot of optimism today. And for that, I'm disappointed. But no plan is etched in stone. A plan should always be reviewed and changes made when necessary ... plans can be changed," Vaughn said.

"We need to get the whole state delegation, the two senators and the six council members on board with this. It would be a waste to not use this facility for what it was designed for."

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, who planned the tour but was unable to attend because of a funeral, received a report about the Friday tour and said he was pleased with the outcome.

"The overriding priority for me is the provision of quality health care (for veterans) in an effective and efficient way. That's why we've been so focused on these contracts for specialty services, and that's a real need for veterans," Inglis said during a conference call.

"We're going to be writing to the undersecretary of health for (Veteran Affairs). I'll be doing that letter, and that will move things along to assure us that the Veterans Health Administration is fully aware of what's available to them."

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