



## Venice hospital pitch retooled

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Sarasota Memorial Hospital is no longer challenging the state's rejection of its plan submitted earlier this year to build a hospital in Venice, and instead will start a new, "enhanced" application for a hospital at the same location on Laurel Road, near Interstate 75.

The public hospital system plans to focus on gaining approval for the new application, rather than defending the previous one in court.

The new application, which will be made public in mid-October, includes additional services to be offered at the proposed hospital that were not included in the original application, confirmed Sarasota Memorial spokeswoman Kim Savage.

The decision about which services to add were based on feedback from the community and from the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration, which rejected Sarasota Memorial's Venice hospital proposal in June.

In letters filed with the agency opposing Sarasota Memorial's original plans, Venice Regional Bayfront Health and other local hospitals argued that since Sarasota Memorial's first application did not offer any new services to the area, such as pediatrics or labor and delivery, a new hospital would simply duplicate services already available and flood the region with unnecessary hospital beds.

Savage declined to say what new services would be added, but confirmed that Sarasota

Memorial still plans to expand its footprint in the southern portion of the county.

"SMH remains committed to establishing a hospital in the Venice/South County area, first on the property we own on Laurel Road, and next in North Port," Savage said Thursday.

After AHCA's denial of Sarasota Memorial's application for a "certificate of need" to build the new hospital, Sarasota Memorial had filed a challenge to appeal the decision before an administrative law judge.

"We dropped our appeal to focus on our new certificate of need application," Savage said. "Rather than spend our time and money in legal proceedings that could drag out years, we feel investing our resources in a new, enhanced application provides a better opportunity to demonstrate our capabilities and commitment to expand south county residents' access to affordable, high-quality care."

Sarasota Memorial officials wrote a letter to AHCA signaling their intent to file a new application in August, thinking that a fresh application might offer a faster route to gaining approval, Savage said. The hospital's new full application is due to AHCA on Oct. 12.

The case defending the former application had been scheduled for hearings before a judge with the Florida Division of Administrative Hearings in December and January. However, Sarasota Memorial filed a one-page document last week volunteering to dismiss its appeal and the case was closed on Monday.

While AHCA had denied Sarasota Memorial's previous plans for an 80-bed hospital near the Interstate 75-Laurel Road interchange, Sarasota Memorial initially argued it met the legal requirements for approval and that there was a need for the new hospital in the area.

The denial issued in June stated that, "the applicant did not demonstrate...that the proposed project would foster competition and promote quality and cost effectiveness to all residents of Sarasota County."

Sarasota Memorial's proposal was opposed by Venice Regional Bayfront Health, which has since announced plans to build a new hospital to replace the aging facility near downtown Venice. That building was constructed in 1955 and has had numerous problems over the past year. Two other area hospitals, Bayfront Health Port Charlotte and Fawcett Memorial Hospital in Port Charlotte, also opposed Sarasota Memorial's original application.

After Sarasota Memorial's new application is filed in October, AHCA will have several weeks to decide whether to approve or deny it.