

# Health center delays cause host of concerns



**POLITICS  
& POWER**

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**T**here's good news and bad news about the much-delayed opening of a new Patchogue health center.

First the bad news: Over the past year, Suffolk County has paid more than 50 percent over the normal annual rent for the East Main Street health center site that has operated for 36 years. That's because Suffolk's three-year lease has expired and the county is renting at a higher month-to-month rate.

The pricey premium increased what had been \$556,972 annual rent to \$835,458 because a new location on North Ocean Avenue north of Sunrise Highway, about two miles away, is not ready to open.

Hudson River Healthcare, a nonprofit that runs all eight county health centers, bought the new site — an 84,000-square foot former Verizon building — two years ago after receiving an \$8.77 million state grant and another \$11.78 million from the county. The new health center will take up 27,000 square feet of the two-story building.

But despite the added short-term increase, Hudson River and aides to County Executive Steve Bellone said the move will save the county money in the long run because the nonprofit owns the new site for the Patchogue health center.

Bellone aides say the county will save \$3 million in rental and property tax costs over the 18 years the county pays bonds on the \$11.8 million grant, and \$800,000 annually in later years.

But the delay also has created concern for the landlord of the current Patchogue health center.

A year ago, the landlord signed a lease with a new tenant, New York Cancer and Blood Specialists. Company officials are eager to move into the 25,000-square-foot building and open a cancer treatment center they say will create construction and local jobs and help spur downtown redevelopment.

Robert Frost, president of Signature Partners, which controls the property through an affiliate, said he has received “no definitive date” for HRH's exit, even though the county had plans to move before the last contract extension in 2015.

“We expected the county to be ready to leave by the time that lease was up,” Frost said.

“The county has had more than enough time to plan and execute the move, but has not yet been able to do so.”

“It's a great concern to us,” said Michael Boonin, New York Cancer and Blood Specialists' vice president, which has 26 locations statewide, including 16 on Long Island.

Boonin said delays prompted his firm late last year to add a “drop-dead date” of July 1 to the lease, after which they can cancel.

“We've invested a lot of time, effort and resources into this project,” Boonin said. While it's “a perfect site” with a downtown location, and proximity to a hospital, “we cannot afford to wait indefinitely.”

Suffolk County Comptroller John M. Kennedy, a Republican challenging Bellone in November, said he faulted county leadership: “They cannot adhere to a simple timeline. Over and over, they have shown they lack the most basic skills to manage.”

Jason Elan, Bellone's spokesman, said, “This financial phony neglects to acknowledge the millions of dollars that the administration has saved by transferring its health centers to the private sector while expanding vital services.”

Legis. Rob Calarco (D-Patchogue), who has both the

old and new health centers in his district, said HRH experienced initial delays in the permitting process with Brookhaven Town in light of community concerns that the office space was being converted into a health center. “I think the town was trying to make sure it was a clean process, by dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's,” he said.

That delayed construction until early this year, Calarco said, but added both new facilities will improve health care in the area.

Brookhaven Supervisor Edward P. Romaine said the site got rezoning approval even though town officials felt there were “better sites,” and the project faced local opposition over worries about HRH's plans for the rest of the building, which have not been detailed.

James Sinkoff, HRH's deputy executive officer, said the latest timeline calls for construction to end by Aug. 15. However, he said approvals of the Brookhaven building inspector and fire marshal are still needed for a certificate of occupancy. Also needed is state health department approval.

“We hope [the certificate of occupancy] will come as close to the end of construction as humanly possible,” Sinkoff said.