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Psychiatric hospital would address an unmet need

By Joe Curtis and Gary Schiappacasse

YIMBY -- Yes In My Backyard -- made a rare appearance at a zoning commission hearing in Vernon Hills recently.

A standing-room-only crowd packed into the meeting room, while others had to watch the hearing on a television monitor in the lobby, as the planning and zoning commission considered a proposal to establish a behavioral health hospital in Vernon Hills. At the beginning of the meeting, it appeared the board was against this proposal. But as resident after resident went to the microphone to speak in favor of the hospital the tenor changed.

"I hope you will vote to give the people of Lake County a chance to overcome their illnesses by providing this behavioral health hospital," Mary Stewart-Wesson, one of 30 speakers, said.

A member of St. Mary of Vernon Catholic Church, Stewart-Wesson detailed the difficulty she and her family have had in getting help for her adult daughter, who has struggled with mental illness for years. Their search for quality care for a loved one was just one of many similar stories told that night.

Another woman recounted her attempt to get help for her troubled teenage daughter. She and her daughter waited nearly eight hours in an emergency room, seated near a man who was violent and verbally abusive, before being seen by a doctor.

If a behavioral health hospital existed nearby, the young woman would have had access to a facility in which she would have been seen within 15 minutes. And she would have been brought to a unit specializing in adolescents.

There were so many people who wanted to speak in favor of the facility the hearing lasted until past midnight.

Most of those in the audience wore stickers touting Lake County United's (LCU) support for the facility. An affiliate of Metro Industrial Areas Foundation, LCU is a nonprofit and nonpartisan network of faith-based and other associations in Lake County. It responds to issues that emerge from local leaders and institutions and supports responsible solutions to those issues.

At the end of the evening, with the crowd united behind the placement of this new facility, the commissioners voted to recommend that the village board approve a request for a special use permit to use the former office building as a hospital.

As envisioned, the hospital would be operated by US HealthVest in the former CDW administrative building at 300 N. Milwaukee Avenue, in Vernon Hills' Continental Executive Park. The facility would serve a variety of patients, from children to seniors, in discrete units with specialty care.

The company is accredited by The Joint Commission and has hospitals in Des Plaines and in Smyrna and Monroe, Georgia.

Instead of the rancor, divisiveness and anxiety that greet so many new proposals, the issue before the village board of Vernon Hills generated support, agreement and a broad-based desire to see one of the greatest unmet needs in the village and the county addressed with a mental health facility capable of treating people struggling with mental illness and families overwhelmed by their attempts to find appropriate and high-quality mental health services for their loved ones.

Father Joe Curtis is the pastor and Gary Schiappacasse is a parishioner at St. Mary of Vernon Catholic Church, Indian Creek, a member of Lake County United.



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