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Plessen Healthcare gets full support of Luis CEO

By SUZANNE CARLSON Daily News Staff Aug 8, 2018

The CEO of Luis Hospital told the Economic Development Commission on Tuesday it's crucial for St. Croix-based Plessen Healthcare to receive tax benefits and continue operating a private surgical facility because the hospital's operating rooms are not functionally reliable.

The company has twice before applied for tax benefits and received favorable recommendations from the EDC. Those applications were vetoed by Gov. Kenneth Mapp.

Now, the company is applying for a third time, and Luis Hospital CEO Wanda Ruben made it clear that the public hospital is fully in support of the private company's application.

Ruben testified during a public hearing Tuesday that the hospital's damage from hurricanes Irma and Maria was so devastating they've been unable to reopen the entire third floor, leaving two operating rooms that are only being used for emergency and urgent care.

"The JFL leadership team believe it is most important to support the Plessen Healthcare in obtaining the EDC benefits since Plessen has been the facility that supported JFL after the hurricane and during our time of emergency. About three

weeks ago, we suffered the closure of our OR due to more issues that came about, and it is Plessen who we could count on to very rapidly assess these patients and work with our physicians to continue care,” Ruben said.

She said Plessen’s facility has been “instrumental” in ensuring Virgin Islanders have access to emergency medical care, and “most importantly, the Plessen healthcare was selected by the previous administration as the facility to collaborate with the Juan Luis Hospital as the alternate surgery center, in the event that our OR suffers shutdowns, which they have.”

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Service, or CMS, which provides federal oversight for hospitals, has included Plessen in part of a “plan of correction” for Luis, Ruben said, and the hospital is working to obtain a memorandum of understanding with the company in accordance with that plan.

Ruben urged EDC members to support the company’s benefit application at a subsequent meeting, and said Plessen is working in “collaboration and partnership with JFL” to care for all Virgin Islanders.

Plessen Healthcare founder and president Dr. Jan Tawakol testified that he and his wife have yet to pay themselves a salary, and they’re working to expand the company’s capabilities and provide additional services for the community.

The benefit application is not seeking tax breaks on physician income, and only seeks benefits on income from facility fees, Tawakol said.

He also emphasized that the company was founded under the name Plessen Healthcare, a reference to Estate Plessen on St. Croix, and another company was subsequently founded with the name Plessen Opthamology — but that business has no connection to Plessen Healthcare.

The application was opposed in testimony submitted by representatives from Sterling Optical and St. Croix Vision Center Inc., and both companies argued the benefits would be an unfair advantage not enjoyed by all medical facilities

providing various forms of patient care.

Trudy Fenster, attorney for Sterling Optical, said Plessen should be denied benefits as they're in direct competition with Luis Hospital, and scoffed at suggestions that the company's benefits would enable them to build an infrastructure for medical tourism, in which individuals travel to areas where medical procedures are cheaper but of similar quality to mainland care facilities.

Tawakol said the benefits would be specific to the surgical center, the company is already engaging in medical tourism, and physicians bring their patients to the facility for surgery.

"We are open to all," Tawakol said.

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