

Spaulding Rehab Network plans to close 2 nursing homes

By Priyanka Dayal McCluskey and Kay Lazar | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 08, 2016

Spaulding Rehabilitation Network plans to close two nursing homes, in the North End and West Roxbury, over the next year and move their services to a new location in Brighton.

Executives at Spaulding, which is owned by Partners HealthCare, the state's largest health system, said Wednesday the move will allow them to house seniors and treat patients in a more modern space and save at least \$2 million a year in overhead costs.

The Spaulding Nursing and Therapy Center in the North End, with 140 beds, and in West Roxbury, with 78 beds, serve both as nursing homes for the elderly and short-term rehab facilities. The Brighton location will be much smaller than those two facilities combined, with 123 beds, but David E. Storto, president of the Spaulding rehab network, said he expects it will be big enough to accommodate existing residents.

Spaulding's plans will be an early test of new regulations for nursing home closures. The rules that went into effect Jan. 1 require nursing home operators to notify the public before selling or closing a facility, and hearings are mandated for closings. The changes in the North End, first reported by NorthEndWaterfront.com earlier this week, also face opposition from the community.

Storto said Spaulding believes it is not subject to a mandatory public hearing because the North End facility is being transferred, not closed. But he added, "We

will comply with the regulations however [the Department of Public Health] instructs us.”

Health department spokesman Scott Zoback said the agency could not say whether the closing would trigger mandatory public hearings because it has not yet received formal notification from Spaulding. “We will determine an appropriate review process once those materials are received,” Zoback said.

Nursing homes have been sold and closed at a rapid clip in recent years in Massachusetts, but the public has had virtually no say in the process. The new rules, pushed for years by advocates, were designed to change that.

Wynn Gerhard, a senior attorney at Greater Boston Legal Services, said Spaulding’s planned closings should be subject to mandatory public hearings.

“This is troubling at the very least,” Gerhard said. “It seems like there is some sort of slicing and dicing of these regulations.”

Spaulding is already getting pushback for its plans to close the North End facility, which is home to some seniors who have lived in the neighborhood their whole lives.

“People are up in arms. They are very dissatisfied with Partners’ decision,” said State Representative Aaron Michlewitz, a Boston Democrat. “I understand the financial constraints that Partners faces, but the thought that you are going to be taking out some of our most vulnerable seniors and you’re going to uproot them at this point of their lives, it’s truly shameful.”

Michlewitz and City Councilor Sal LaMattina, who also represents the neighborhood, both said they would oppose any plan to replace the nursing home with condos.

Defending the move, Spaulding’s Storto said the North End facility’s bathrooms are

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“[This] is very much driven by the need for a better physical space, a safer physical space,” Storto said. “The facilities are not in good condition, and we’ve been struggling for a while with what could we do here to create a better physical space for the patients and our families and our staff.”

If Partners does put the Fulton Street building up for sale, it could find a strong market.

Opportunities to build new in the narrow, brick-lined streets of the North End are rare, and the neighborhood has seen little new development in the current building boom. But one-bedroom apartments nearby are currently listed for sale for as much as \$850,000.

And the nursing home sits next to a surface parking lot that’s owned by the Boston Redevelopment Authority, which is launching a push to sell more of its land. The lot is not currently being marketed for sale, but a BRA website lists it as a “potential housing site.”

The nursing home sits on land once controlled by the Boston Redevelopment Authority under urban renewal, so any change of its use would require approval by the BRA board, and could — if council members request — trigger a City Council hearing, said BRA spokesman Nick Martin.

But before the North End property is redeveloped, Spaulding must move to its new location. It has a purchase-and-sale agreement to buy the former Wingate Healthcare nursing home on North Beacon Street in Brighton. The deal is expected to close in late July.

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