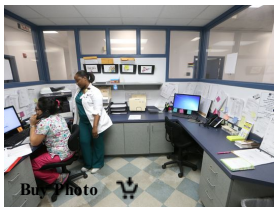


Controversy stifles FSU medical facility plans



Sean Rossman, Democrat staff writer 7:58 a.m. EDT August 2, 2016



(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

Dr. John Fogarty admits his enthusiasm for a primary care clinic in Frenchtown might have gotten in the way of reality.

It would be a win-win, thought the dean of the Florida State University College of Medicine. It would be a much-needed basic care option for residents, would re-energize Frenchtown and offset about \$1 million in salaries for the university's primary care physicians.

But it won't happen, at least not in the city-owned lot on Macomb Street across from the Renaissance Center.

University officials have abandoned the \$4 million building after it received strong pushback from some in the medical community who said it was too close — three blocks — from the main Neighborhood Medical Center location on West Brevard Street. Putting up a facility near the Renaissance Center, they said, would kill the 40-year-old institution.



A proposal by the Florida State University College of Medicine to build a primary health facility across from the Renaissance Center is now dead after some in the medical community protested it would sit too close to Neighborhood Medical Center. (Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

"I thought it was a good idea," Fogarty said. "Apparently, there are people that don't think so and I respect that."

Not only did some residents not like the idea, it sparked a furor among some who called it an attempt by FSU and the city of Tallahassee to drive Neighborhood out of business. The anger and accusations came out in meetings and emails directed at local elected leaders and officials from FSU and Florida A&M University.

"It deeply is concerning that our city officials would knowingly and willfully conspire along with Florida State University College of Medicine to systematically destroy an organization that has served as the medical safety net for thousands of uninsured people living in this area," wrote Otis Kirksey, a FAMU professor who once served on the Neighborhood board of directors. "The establishment of a second primary care clinic in the Frenchtown area would be financially detrimental to NMC. How could any of you think that this is OK?"

The origin of a controversy

Over the last seven months, the College of Medicine's plan to build the 2-story, 28,000 square foot facility went from promising reality to dead end.

Fogarty said the idea, which has been a discussion at the medical school for about two years, is born out of the need for more primary care physicians and those serving the underinsured in Tallahassee.

The university hired Pittsburgh-based consulting firm Tripp Umbach to help come up with the size, scope and location of the clinic. The firm also assisted with holding focus groups for Bond Community Health Center and Neighborhood. In January, FSU hosted a stakeholders meeting at the college of medicine with Bond, Neighborhood, Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare, Capital Regional Medical Center and Capital Medical Society, a professional group of more than 600 local physicians.

Fogarty said stakeholders were receptive to the idea of a medical facility but there was "trepidation" as to how it would impact other facilities. The group left the meeting with the idea that conversations would continue.

"Most people in the community I think agree or at least understand that the College of Medicine really does need a practice clinic," Fogarty said. "It really has come down to the where."

The location would prove to be the problem.

The city lot, a nearly 1-acre rectangular parcel stretching from West Virginia Street to West Carolina Street, wasn't the first choice for FSU, which was looking at university-owned parcels close to the medical school.

The College of Medicine reached out to Commissioner Gil Ziffer, who has led a push to create a community school, to talk with the city about building a clinic near FSU's campus.

The city in May showed the school all of the properties it owned in Frenchtown to see if any of the parcels may work for them. FSU targeted the strip across from the Renaissance Center. Fogarty said building on city land sounded "infinitely simpler" because FSU land comes with some constraints.

Ziffer said the city may have considered giving FSU land for free, depending on the size and impact of the project. Any deal, he said, would have needed City Commission approval.

The city waited for an offer, while the College of Medicine associate dean for clinical and community affairs Dr. Daniel Van Durme worked to broker a deal with the community.

How the deal died

In late May, according to emails obtained by the Tallahassee Democrat, he met with Neighborhood and Bond, both which said they were "very concerned about the adverse effects this will have on their operations." He also met with TMH President and CEO Mark O'Bryant, who was "not enthused" and Mayor Andrew Gillum, who supported the idea and "expressed hopes and concerns that we can work something out with NMC."

In early June, Fogarty met with Rev. R.B. Holmes, pastor of Bethel Missionary Baptist Church, who told FSU to "press on" and move quickly with the idea. Holmes said he did not have enough information on the project to offer a comment for this story.

All the while, the building itself was taking shape. Claude Walker, CEO of the Summit Group, calculated rental prices for the clinic and annual costs. In late June, college of medicine administrators met with Mad Dog Construction and the city planning department. On June 29, Fogarty presented a formal budget request to FSU President John Thrasher.

A week later, a meeting with the Frenchtown and South Side Community Advisory Council revealed more opposition to the project. Repeatedly, residents said the plan would "kill" NMC and called it a "slap in the face."

Dr. Ed Holifield, a strong critic of city and county governments on health issues in the black community, has led the call against the facility.

"The FSU Medical Center is in close proximity to Neighborhood Medical Center, and is clearly designed to drive the Neighborhood Medical Center out of business," Holifield wrote in a Friday email. "Note that all of this is being done under the cover of darkness with black people living in the community having essentially no input into what is taking place. Blacks in the community clearly don't matter with their destiny being dictated by (City Manager) Rick Fernandez, FSU, Big Bend Cares, and the white-dominated power elite that runs Tallahassee."

Alexis McMillan, chair of Neighborhood's board of directors, said she found out about the plan a month ago. The news left the organization "surprised and shocked," she said.

"I know that there needs to be a teaching facility for Florida State's medical school. I'm not in favor of something that's a stone's throw away from Neighborhood Medical Center," she said. "It could impact the ability for us to continue to work with the people in the Tallahassee community."

However, Sally McRorie, FSU's provost and executive vice president for academic affairs, has officially confirmed the university isn't moving forward with the project on the city land. Fernandez said the city has received interest from developers and will likely put the parcel out for bid.

But, McRorie said the university is "excited" about the opportunity and still plans to build a clinic staffed by faculty and students that would both meet the needs of the community and serve as a model for teaching.

"We have been considering several possible sites for the clinic, including the site in Frenchtown," she said. "However, there are several serious concerns with that site, not the least of which is the potential impact on the Neighborhood Medical Center. Those concerns rule that site out. Our plan, at this point, is to continue to evaluate our options and make a decision that is in the best interests of the university and the entire Tallahassee community."

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