

Medical Mud Fight at the Clear Creek Crossing Corral?

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A recent turf battle between two metro Denver health care providers – Lutheran Medical Center and UCHealth – included claims of paid lobbyists, spreading rumors and throwing mud at the Clear Creek Crossing project in Wheat Ridge.

The issue became public at the Feb. 12 Wheat Ridge City Council meeting, where a public hearing for a rezoning request from Evergreen Development was postponed until Monday, March 26. While the council agreed to allow a large crowd – mostly Lutheran staff – to testify, most of the approximately 25 people signed up chose to wait until the March 26 hearing.

Evergreen is seeking a zoning change for the 109-acre site on the west side of I-70 and south of Clear Creek from planned commercial development to planned mixed-use development. They want to develop it for commercial, entertainment, residential and a major employer. The zoning change would allow a broader mix of uses, including a hospital campus.

The issue included an email campaign against the rezoning by Lutheran staff to council members.

In a Feb. 9 email to a project mailing list, Evergreen managing principal Tyler Carlson claimed “paid lobbyists have been out and about in the neighborhood, throwing mud at Clear Creek Crossing ...”

“It’s unfortunate that certain opponents of Clear Creek Crossing feel it necessary to hire paid operatives to conduct neighborhood ‘surveys,’ shake down business owners and neighbors and spread rumors or even blatant lies on social media,” he wrote.

Carlson noted Evergreen held eight public meetings about the project and planned another the week before the rezoning hearing. He blamed the “aggressive smear campaign” for the delay.

In an interview, Carlson said Evergreen is not under contract with any potential user, hospital or otherwise.

“We have had interest from a wide variety of employers, including medical groups, (research and development) groups,” he added.

Carlson said he understands Lutheran’s concerns.

“Things have kind of died down now, after a lot of misinformation was put out there,” he stated. “The project has not changed since we first proposed it. We always wanted some type of corporate use and a hospital or similar facility was always a potential.”

Earlier plans for the property included a Cabela's store in 2005, which were dropped when the Great Recession happened several years later. The site was also considered for a Super Walmart before the company bowed out last year.

Providing care vs. too many beds

UCHealth spokesman Dan Weaver wrote in an email that "UCHealth does not have any current involvement with the Clear Creek Crossing project, and we have no plans to build a new hospital on the west side of the metro Denver area at this time. ... I will mention, though, that UCHealth currently cares for more than 12,000 individual patients from the northwest metro area, including portions of Arvada, Golden and Wheat Ridge. Our goal is to provide excellent care close to home for our patients."

UCHealth – part of the University of Colorado system – has recently opened several free-standing emergency rooms and primary-care clinics along the Front Range.

Lutheran is part of SCL Health, a nonprofit, faith-based health system. It includes an acute-care hospital, Lutheran Hospice Center, Lutheran Spine Center at Denver West and Bridges Integrative Health and Wellness Services.

Officials with Lutheran would not comment beyond a previously released statement that noted its more than century in Wheat Ridge, its status as the city's largest employer and called other aspects of the project "a great boon for the city."

However, a "fast-track" rezoning so another hospital system could build a healthcare facility within five miles of three existing hospitals (Lutheran, St. Anthony and OrthoColorado) and numerous outpatient facilities was a big concern.

"Health care trends continue to demonstrate a decline in inpatient utilization," the statement read. "As more care is pushed to the outpatient and home setting, the number of inpatient beds required continues to decline. Adding more inpatient capacity is not consistent with the health care needs of the future and it is not in the best interest of this community."

"It's never been our intent to stand in the way of development or growth," Lutheran President and CEO Grant Wicklund told the city council. "What we don't want to see is another hospital with unnecessary beds and rising costs."

Shelley Thompson, chief partnerships officer for St. Anthony Hospital in Lakewood – operated by Centura Health – told the council St. Anthony supports Lutheran.

"The community already has 104 more beds than needed and growth projections are not expected to need more than 20 more," she said. "We're only six miles from Lutheran and we believe between us, all necessary health care services are provided."

Thompson also noted a new facility would siphon away staff, doctors and nurses from current facilities at a time of staff shortages, especially in nursing.

Jeff Helton, associate professor of health care management at Metropolitan State University of

Denver, called Lutheran's concerns warranted. As a former health system chief financial officer, Helton said he wrestled with many of the same issues.

"I can see why Lutheran is very concerned because this is in their back yard," he noted. "It's their primary service area, so they're trying to head them off at the pass, you might say."

Helton said if a new facility is a "mini hospital," or one that only takes "the easy cases," Lutheran would suffer.

"It's like an airline selling hundreds of cheap seats and a few more expensive seats to offset them," Helton stated. "It would hurt Lutheran because the more involved cases cost more money so they'd be more likely to lose money" per patient.

A loss of staff is also valid, Helton said.

"Doctors know that if they have a hospital or facility that's closer to their office, they will admit their patients there, or even move their office," he added. "And no one likes to drive in Denver's traffic, so if another facility cuts commute time, that makes sense, too."