

The hospital Prince George's deserves

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OF THE 32,000 Marylanders who leave the state each year to seek medical care elsewhere, about three-quarters are from Prince George's County. One reason is a "pull" factor: the abundance of health-care facilities in the District and Northern Virginia. The other reason is a "push": the paucity of high-quality health-care options in Prince George's itself.

It's deplorable that residents of a sprawling county on the porch of the nation's capital don't have better health-care options closer to home. Now, after years of false starts, political dysfunction and uncertain funding, Prince Georgians are closer than ever to getting the top-flight regional hospital they deserve.

That's the takeaway from the announcement last week that Dimensions Healthcare System, which oversees county-owned medical facilities, has decided to locate [a new, 259-bed regional hospital and medical center](#) just outside the Beltway at the Largo Town Center Metro stop. The \$645 million teaching hospital would replace the current, substandard Prince George's Hospital Center, in Cheverly, with a full-service medical center and trauma center operated by the University of Maryland Medical System.

There are several reasons to cheer this development. One is the logic in choosing a 26-acre site for the new hospital with easy access to Metro. It's not clear how many of the 2,000-odd hospital personnel or 60,000 or so annual patients would travel to and from the facility by Metro; still, it's much better to have a rapid transit option than not.

The new hospital may also provide a badly needed trigger for economic development in the area around Largo, which, like so much of the county, is heavy on houses and light on office buildings, shops and stores. Beefing up the commercial share of Prince George's tax base would provide a critical lift for the county, which now relies on residential property owners for 70 percent of tax revenue, more than in neighboring jurisdictions.

For years the county and the state have been forced to subsidize Prince George's Hospital Center, which treats large numbers of uninsured and indigent patients, to the tune of \$30 million annually. Despite handwringing by elected officials, things were at a standstill until voters elected a new county executive, Rushern L. Baker III (D), in 2010. It was Mr. Baker, with crucial assists from Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) and legislative leaders in Annapolis, who was instrumental in forging a deal that secured county and state funding and in enlisting the support of the Prince George's County Council.

A few hurdles remain. The most critical one may be the issuance of a certificate of need, which is required before any hospital can be built in the state. That is in the hands of the Maryland Health Care Commission, which is certain to hear opposition from neighboring hospital systems that may fear losing patients and profits to the new facility in Prince George's and may try to undermine the deal.

County officials must press hard to overcome those objections. The absence of a top-flight hospital in a locality of 880,000 people — one that provides a variety of specialty care and tertiary services — is a long-running scandal. There have been too many delays. Now, with the selection of a sensible site, the county is in the home stretch.

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