

# Riverside, locals plead for hospital

**By Stephen Faleski**  
*Staff Writer*

The Virginia Department of Health held an "informal fact-finding conference" on Dec. 10 for the purpose of reconsider-

ing whether to award Riverside Health Systems a certificate of public need for its proposed 50-bed Isle of Wight County hospital.

Virginia has required state approval for new hospitals since 1973. VDH staff had recommended

in October that Riverside's application be denied on the grounds that the \$100 million hospital project "unnecessarily duplicates existing services already available in surplus" in Planning District 20 — a geographic region

that includes Isle of Wight and Southampton counties and the cities of Franklin, Suffolk, Chesapeake, Portsmouth, Norfolk and Virginia Beach.

The fact-finding conference functioned much like a court

proceeding, with lawyers for Riverside arguing the merits of their proposal in front of VDH adjudication officer Doug Harris — and calling eight witnesses to testify.

• **See HOSPITAL, p. 4**



**Smithfield Town Councilwoman and NAACP President Valerie Butler makes her case for the proposed Riverside Smithfield hospital to Virginia Department of Health adjudication officer Doug Harris at an “informal fact-finding conference” in Henrico County.**

# Hospital

• Continued from p. 1

The proceeding was held at the VDH’s Perimeter Center in Henrico County.

Emily Towey, lead counsel for Riverside, took specific issue with the VDH report’s claim that Planning District 20 already has a surplus of available hospital beds and general-purpose operating rooms.

In September 2012, she said, Bon Secours’ DePaul Medical Center in Norfolk was approved for two new operating rooms despite a staff report recommending its certificate of public need be denied, after an adjudication officer learned that 11 of the operating rooms that staff had counted toward the alleged surplus were not general-purpose but rather dedicated to specialized surgeries. In November 2019, the state health commissioner approved additional medical-surgical beds at Bon Secours’ St. Francis Medical Center in Midlothian, overturning a recommended denial, after an adjudication officer found VDH staff had improperly counted obstetric beds and beds in specialty and long-term care hospitals toward an alleged several-hundred-bed surplus. When subtracting the number of unstaffed beds from the revised 380-bed surplus in that case, the surplus was reduced to just 25, Towey said.

She asserts the VDH has made similar mistakes when calculating “a surplus of 229 medical-surgical beds in PD 20 for the five-year planning horizon” in its recommended denial. Riverside’s own calculations show only a 135-bed surplus, Towey said, which actually becomes a deficit of 79 beds when the unstaffed beds are subtracted.

Valerie Cheatham, an analyst from the VDH’s Division of Certificate of Public Need present at the proceeding, however, said the VDH “stands by” the claims in its report.

Towey’s first witness was Jessica Macalino, Riverside’s associate vice president for cardiovascular and pulmonary services, who is herself an Isle of Wight County resident. Towey asked Macalino a series of questions, including whether Macalino agreed with the VDH staff report’s conclusion that the proposed Smithfield-area hospital was not needed.

Macalino and every other witness she asked that particular question all gave the same answer: “no.”

Macalino argued that while the VDH analysis of current travel times to Riverside Regional Medical Center in Newport News and Sentara Obici Hospital in Suffolk shows a 22- to 24-minute commute on paper, in reality the trip takes upwards of half an hour due to traffic congestion.

The James River Bridge, which connects Isle of Wight County to Newport News, is the longest state-maintained bridge in Virginia, measuring 4.5 miles.

“I myself have been stuck (in traffic) at the James River Bridge on multiple occasions,” Ma-

calino said, adding that the proposed hospital would also serve Planning District 19, which includes Sussex and Surry counties.

Next, Towey called Isle of Wight Volunteer Rescue Squad Chief Brian Carroll, who testified that Isle of Wight runs about 17% of Surry County’s emergency medical service calls via a mutual-aid agreement. Absent traffic congestion, it takes roughly 27 minutes for an ambulance to get from the area that would be served by the proposed hospital to Riverside Regional — just under the 30-minute standard in Virginia’s state medical facilities plan.

When an ambulance was recently called to Mill Swamp Road, it took that driver 42 minutes to transport the patient to Riverside Regional, Carroll said. Travel time for an ambulance that recently responded to Rattle Snake Trail was even higher, at 55 minutes.

Carroll added that roughly 95% of heart attack patients are diverted from Obici, the closer of the two hospitals, to Riverside Regional.

“These are real-life transport times ... Time is tissue; time is muscle,” Carroll said.

Kim Liebold, a Riverside cardiac nurse practitioner and Isle of Wight resident, said her commute to Riverside Regional is 48 minutes. She then tearfully told Harris of the day her son died in her home in 2011 as she tried to perform CPR while

waiting for an ambulance.

“I listened for that siren, I listened for that hope ... They could have helped if they could have gotten there in time,” Liebold said.

Next up was Valerie Butler, a Smithfield town councilwoman who also serves as president of Isle of Wight County’s NAACP chapter. According to 2020 census data, Isle of Wight County is 22.4% Black. But, according to Butler, African Americans account for a disproportionate 45% of the county’s EMS calls.

“We cannot continue to neglect the health and well-being of the minority community by failing to provide adequate medical services,” Butler said.

Dr. Chris Stolle, Riverside’s vice president of medical affairs, then spoke to the proposed hospital’s ability to draw medical professionals to Isle of Wight County via Riverside’s residency programs.

“Physicians tend to stay where they train,” he said.

Stolle, an obstetrician by specialty, added that when complications arise during labor and delivery, minutes, and even seconds, can make a “huge difference.”

Megan Merrit, administrator of Riverside Healthy Living Community — a Smithfield nursing home and rehabilitation facility — then spoke to limited choices available to the facility’s patients should they need to be hospitalized. Jim Collins, a member of the county’s Economic Development Authority, followed

her testimony by stating that 60% of the county’s residents currently have to travel outside of the county to find work. A local hospital would bring new jobs much closer to home for area residents, he said.

The final witness, Dr. Nathan Wilson, said it’s been his observation as an economist and former employee of the Federal Trade Commission that lack of competition among hospital systems typically results in higher costs for medical services, which drives up the costs health insurance companies pass along to employers, and can in turn dissuade employers from hiring additional employees or raising wages. Sentara, he added, held 50% of the hospital market in Planning District 20 as of 2005, and had grown in influence to holding three-quarters of the market as of 2019 — a trend he speculated may be influenced by Sentara having created its own health insurance company, Optima.

Riverside and the VDH will have the opportunity to submit written “findings of fact” and “conclusions of law” on Jan. 21, and can submit rebuttals to those findings and conclusions on Feb. 2. Harris will make his final recommendation to state Health Commissioner Dr. Norman Oliver on March 21. Oliver, who has the final say on the certificate of public need, is expected to make his decision that same day.

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# Claremont water project stalls

**By Stephen Faleski**  
*Staff Writer*

On Mancha Avenue in the riverfront town of Claremont in Surry County stands a rusted tower that's so overgrown with vegetation, motorists may not even notice it among the surrounding trees.

• See **WATER**, p. 8

The roughly 22,000-gallon tank once held the town's drinking water, but according to the Virginia Department of Health, it hasn't been used in decades. In 2012, the VDH warned town officials that without that tower, Claremont's waterworks had insufficient capacity for the 300-plus users on its system at the time, but plans to replace the tower remain stalled after nine years.

The VDH had offered the town a \$1.8 million loan in 2016 for a new tower and related upgrades, but withdrew the offer earlier this year owing to the project's lack of progress. According to Mayor George Edwards, the town is now waiting to hear back from the U.S. Department of Agriculture on an alternative funding proposal.

In 2012, the VDH's Office of Drinking Water wrote to Edwards, taking issue with the roughly 300 water users on the town's system given that Claremont's waterworks permit lists a design capacity of up to 47,200 gallons per day, which is only enough to supply 193 residential connections.

The 193 figure is also predicated on the town's water tower and well house both being in operation, but according to the letter, Claremont's tower has been out of service since at least 1983. A follow-up letter from VDH Office of Drinking Water District Engineer Kendra Hardy states the structural integrity of the tower is questionable, given that vegetation covers a portion of it and there is evidence of rust on its legs.

According to the VDH correspondence, without the elevated storage tank, the town of roughly 350 people has an effective water storage capacity to serve fewer than 10 residential connections and can't provide sufficient flow for fire hydrants.

The VDH proposed four options in 2012 to remedy the issue, ranging in estimated cost from \$250,000 to upwards of \$600,000. Two involved refurbishing and restarting use of the town's existing water tower, and two recommended demolishing the old 22,000-gallon tower and replacing it with one capable of storing 130,000 gallons.

By 2015, Edwards had stepped down from his role as mayor. His successor, Louise Hansch, wrote to the Office of Drinking Water on Feb. 24 of that year asking that the town's permitted number of waterworks connections be increased to a total of 300. The VDH replied March 16, 2015, denying her request on the grounds that the town's storage capacity was "far

less than what is required" by state waterworks regulations.

In 2016, Hansch applied on behalf of the town to the VDH for funding assistance in the amount of \$1.8 million. In that application, she proposed using the money to construct one 50,000-gallon elevated storage tank, demolish the existing tank and upgrade or replace 22,000 linear feet of 4-inch and less water lines to 6-inch ones with roughly 64 fire hydrants. Though the 50,000-gallon proposal is far less than the 130,000-gallon tank the state said was needed, "changed" is handwritten in the margin of the town's copy of the application, with an arrow drawn pointing toward the project's description. But there's no other notation as to whether the tank capacity was what had changed or if so, what the new capacity would be.

Per that application, the town was to close on the loan with the Virginia Resources Authority, which co-administers the VDH's Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, by Jan. 30, 2017, begin construction by Feb. 7, 2017 and have the new tower completed by Feb. 7, 2018. Hansch received a response from the VDH on Oct. 5, 2016 approving her request for a loan and offering the town two options for repayment: a \$1.6 million 30-year loan at 2.65% interest coupled with \$193,000 principal forgiveness if the town were to agree to raise its water rates per a schedule set by the VDH, or 100% of the \$1.8 million being repayable over 30 years at 2.65% interest if the town was unwilling to raise its rates. The town chose the former, committing to nearly double its water rates from the then-current \$26.84 minimum being billed to residents each month to a target monthly minimum of \$46.22.

But the town never closed on the loan.

By 2019, Hansch had stepped down and Edwards was once again serving as the town's mayor. That year, he received a letter from the Virginia Resources Authority informing him that closing on the loan could not occur "until all applicable pre-closing conditions have been met." Among these conditions was the VRA's expectation that principal repayment "be supported by the moral obligation of Surry County."

According to Kelly Ward, director of the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, a moral obligation pledge is a form of credit enhancement typically provided by a government to

another entity. In the event that Claremont should ever default on a payment, the government entity pledging its moral obligation — in this case, Surry County — would agree to make the payment.

"This is subject to a budget appropriation and is not legally binding," Ward said.

The 2019 letter then warns that if closing does not occur by April 30, 2020, the VRA and the Department of Health reserve the right to withdraw the loan money for not completing the requirements in a timely manner.

Edwards received a follow-up letter Aug. 25, 2020, this time from the VDH, warning him that a review of the agency's records "indicates that multiple milestones in the approved project schedule have not been met," and again warning of the agency's right to bypass the project and reallocate the loan money if funding assistance agreements were not executed or construction was not initiated within 12 months.

"If this delay has been caused by COVID-19, then please document the specific circumstances including an estimate of how much time this has delayed the project," writes Keith J. Kornegay, project team leader of financial and construction assistance programs for the Office of Drinking Water.

Kornegay further asked that the town submit a revised construction project schedule.

Edwards received another letter from the VDH Dec. 16, 2020, this time from Ward, warning that the VDH was planning to reallocate Claremont's loan money to another project unless the town responded in writing by Jan. 16, 2021 with reasons for the delay and a proposed work plan. Handwritten on that letter is a note that reads "called 1-11-2021 left message, GE."

Ward confirmed to The Smithfield Times that the VDH followed through with its ultimatum earlier this year and officially bypassed Claremont's water tower project.

"The funds will be reallocated to other projects," Ward said.

Howell Godfrey Jr., a resident of Claremont, began organizing a petition last year to dissolve the town's charter. Were that to happen, Claremont would cease to have its own elected government separate from Surry County.

The town's "need of financial assistance" for the waterworks upgrades is among the reasons Godfrey listed in the petition, which seeks to initiate the process outlined in state law for

consolidating local governments. As of June 9, that petition had 82 signatures, Godfrey said.

County Administrator Melissa Rollins also referenced the costly waterworks project and Claremont's allegedly having requested financial assistance from the county in an Oct. 26, 2020 letter she sent the mayor recapping a joint meeting of town, county and state officials on Oct. 19 from her perspective.

However, Claremont's mayor wrote back Nov. 2 that year, stating the town was "more than capable of being financially self-sufficient" and that "assistance with funding for the town was never a consideration."

All the town had asked of the county was to sign as a guarantor on the town's loan.

Ward said she'd spoken with Edwards by phone in January this year, at which time he allegedly told her that the county had been unwilling to provide the moral obligation pledge.

"The guarantor's signature, that seemed to be the sticking point," Edwards said.

But Surry Board of Supervisors Chairman Robert Elliott said during a January 2021 meeting with Godfrey and his co-organizers that the reason the county didn't sign for the loan was because the town never properly asked. The

request for a signature had come solely from Edwards, and not the entirety of Claremont's Town Council, he said.

With the VDH loan issue now moot, Claremont is waiting for the USDA on a funding package Edwards said won't require the county to co-sign. Currently, the federal agency is reviewing the town's financial documentation, and has been provided no information on when that review will be complete, Edwards said.

But, "at this time there's no reason not to keep a positive attitude about this," he said. "We have nothing negative from USDA at this point so we're feeling very positive about this."



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# Isle of Wight to end recycling?

By Stephen Faleski  
Staff Writer

Will Isle of Wight County become the third Western Tidewater locality to follow Smithfield's lead and cease offering recycling services?

Board of Supervisors Chairman Dick Grice has requested a discussion of the costs versus benefits of continuing the recycling program be placed on an upcoming meeting agenda before the start of the next budgeting cycle, which traditionally begins in January when departments submit their funding requests for the coming fiscal year.

According to County Administrator Randy Keaton, "a lot of the recyclables" are now getting incinerated at the Wheelabrator waste-to-energy plant in Portsmouth.

"Recycling is becoming extremely difficult ... the markets have dried up," Keaton told Isle of Wight's Board of Supervisors on Oct. 21.

In 2017 and prior, according to The New York Times, American municipalities were shipping much of their used paper, plastic and other recyclables to China. But in 2018, China banned the import of various types of recyclables and tightened its standards for the materials it would accept, leaving a number of localities unable to find a substitute for the Chinese market.

"If we're not really recycling ... I think we need to reassess that from a financial standpoint," Grice said.

Smithfield ended its recycling contract with Bay Disposal & Recycling in January in accordance with budget cuts its Town Council had adopted in June 2020. The city of Franklin, which borders Isle of Wight's southern tip, followed suit in May.

Both localities had also claimed most of their recyclables were not actually being recycled but rather incinerated. Bay, however, disputed the allegations.

According to Bay spokesman Brandon Newsome, the company sends roughly 30% of the recyclables it collects throughout Hampton Roads to Wheelabrator. The remaining 70% goes to a processing facility.

"We take whatever we can to a processor and if they cannot accept it, the material will go to Wheelabrator," Newsome said earlier this year.

"Some of the recyclables still have some value but the problem is when they're commingled together, the labor to separate the materials is so costly," Keaton said.

A month after the last curbside recycling pickup in Smithfield, Isle of Wight's Public Works Department reported a 41% increase in the tonnage of recyclables being dropped off at its eight public refuse and recycling centers. But without a site-site breakdown there was

no way to tell if Smithfield residents taking carloads of recyclables to Wrenn's Mill and Jones Creek — the two closest recycling centers to Smithfield — were the ones driving the uptick.

A few months later, the town retained Summit Design and Engineering as a consultant for redoing its Comprehensive Plan. As part of that process, Summit surveyed 454 of the town's 8,000-plus residents, 91 of whom expressed dissatisfaction with Smithfield's lack of recycling services, according to the town's community development and planning director, Tammy Clary.

According to Town Manager Michael Stallings, there have been "no discussions on restoring curbside recycling services" at this time.

According to town officials, cutting recycling from Smithfield's contract with Bay was projected to save roughly \$100,000 a year. However, the cost the county would save in landfilling its recyclables rather than continuing its own recycling contract with Bay is "not a large difference," Keaton said. In some large cities, there is indeed a big gap between the cost of recycling versus disposal, but here in Isle of Wight it's "just a few dollars."

As of March, the county was paying \$65 per ton to have Bay collect its recyclables. As of July, the Southeastern Public Service Authority was charging \$61 per ton — up from \$57 last fiscal year — to transport waste from the Isle of Wight transfer station on Four-square Road to the SPSA's regional landfill in Suffolk.

While Smithfield still pays Bay for door-to-door trash pickup and to take the garbage to the transfer station, the county pays SPSA the cost per ton to transport Smithfield's garbage from

the transfer station to the landfill. So any increase in tonnage from Smithfield residents throwing recyclables in with their trash would fall to the county, not the town.

Even if most of the county's recyclables end up at Wheelabrator, "at least they are being converted into steam and electricity," Keaton said. "Our garbage, though, goes to the landfill."

Landfilling all of the county's recyclables, plus Smithfield's, could also have "a huge implication on ... how long the landfill will last," he added.

Keaton, however, is concerned Wheelabrator may some day not be an option.

The waste-to-energy plant currently has a \$10 million contract to supply power to Norfolk Naval Shipyard, but learned in 2020 that the Navy plans to end this agreement in the next two to three years in favor of building its own power plant fueled by natural gas. Construction of that plant has now begun, Keaton said. Wheelabrator officials, in 2020, predicted they would be unable to continue to operate the plant absent the Navy revenue.

One option, Keaton said, might be a Chesapeake-based company that is getting ready to start construction on a plant that would convert household trash into diesel fuel. Chesapeake's City Council granted a conditional use permit for the Hampton Roads Integrated BioEnergy Complex to move forward with its plans to build the plant on June 18, 2019, according to the recorded minutes of that meeting. The plant will utilize technology already in use at a smaller scale.

"This would be the first plant at the larger scale," Keaton said.

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