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Health board impasse may be over

9 members: Lehigh, Northampton have pact to expand panel.

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Officials from both Lehigh and Northampton counties say they are optimistic that the impasse over the proposed bicounty board of health may finally have been solved with the expansion of the board from seven to nine members.

The expansion, which must be approved by both counties' governing bodies, is the second since the counties agreed on the joint project in December.

While Lehigh County has favored a smaller board, Director of Administration Tom Muller said this week that Lehigh officials are open to anything that will get the stalled project moving again. The board has sat dormant for two months as Northampton County discussed its potential nominees.

"Hopefully the board roster will be finalized quickly and they can get on to the difficult challenge of pulling together a plan," Muller said in an interview.

The board started at five members, but was expanded to seven in May to accommodate representatives from Allentown and Bethlehem after the mayors of those cities demanded a voice.

But Northampton County ran into difficulties naming its three members, said Ross Marcus, county human services director. As a result, the county named only two before the process stalled.

Marcus said the additional two members should resolve the logjam and allow for the diversity that Northampton County had hoped for.

"We think it enables us to better meet the needs of the community," Marcus said, adding that the additional Northampton County representative will likely come from St. Luke's Hospital.

So far, representatives from Lehigh Valley and Easton hospitals have been named to the board and Marcus said it is only fair to have St. Luke's represented as well.

The two sides still have not named the "joint" member that will be approved by both sides. According to both Muller and Marcus, names have been offered by both counties, but they have not agreed on one.

To date, Lehigh County has named: Dr. Eric J. Gertner, medical director of the Resident Physician Clinic at Lehigh Valley Hospital; Ilene S. Prokup, chairwoman of the Department of Nursing at Kutztown University

and an epidemiologist with the Northeast Regional Cancer Institute in Scranton; and David Bausch, a former Lehigh County executive and former county nursing home director who also serves on Allentown's health board.

So far, Northampton County has appointed Dr. David Lyon, executive vice president for medical and academic affairs at Easton Hospital; and Bangor Area School District Superintendent John Reinhart.

Muller said Lehigh County would have its final nomination sometime early next month. Marcus said he hoped Northampton's final two would be named "relatively soon." Both men said they do not see any problems with getting the approval of their legislative boards.

"I always ask people for their patience," Marcus said. "If they are patient a little while longer, I think they will be rewarded with a first-class public health department."

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