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## Health department budget rejected

**But plan for Lehigh, Northampton counties isn't dead. 'It's on life support.'**

By Brian Callaway, OF THE MORNING CALL

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A multi-year effort to create a Lehigh Valley Health Department apparently collapsed Monday night. advertisement

Volunteers planning the new health agency pitched an annual budget worth about \$10 million to legislators from Lehigh and Northampton counties. Even as a mostly supportive audience crammed the meeting chambers to urge local leaders to back the proposal, officials ultimately couldn't agree to move forward.

When the budget came to a vote after a sometimes tense four-hour session, most of Lehigh's commissioners voted in favor of the proposal, but the majority of Northampton's council rejected it. Both counties had to approve the spending plan for it to advance.

The vote at the Northampton County Courthouse didn't officially kill the idea of a health department. One or both county legislatures still needs to vote to end the effort at a separate meeting.

Lehigh Commissioner Percy Dougherty said it's not dead, "it's on life support."

But the meeting made it seem likely that a vote to bury the project could happen soon.

"More government is not what we need in bad times," said Ron Angle, president of Northampton County Council.

Other local leaders spoke in favor of creating the department.

Lehigh Commissioner Andy Roman said a new health agency could help prepare for terrorist attacks or other catastrophic events, something he said could be vital given the Lehigh Valley's proximity to New York and Philadelphia.

"Yes, the money is important," he said, "but let's look at the benefits and then determine if the cost is worthwhile."

Organizers have spent years touting the benefits of a new regional health bureau. Allentown and Bethlehem each have their own city health departments, which would be merged into the new agency. But the rest of the region hasn't had a local agency responsible for overseeing such services as immunizations, restaurant inspections and preventive programs.

And many of the people who attended Monday's meeting said the potential benefits of those services would

last long after current fiscal worries have eased.

Alan Jennings, who heads the Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley, a nonprofit service group, urged legislators to back a new health department and give it time to prove its worth.

"You will not be remembered because you saved a couple of dollars," he said. "You will be remembered because you made a difference."

Each county is being asked to contribute about \$500,000 per year to pay for the new agency. About 90 percent of the budget would be covered by state and federal grants, contributions from nonprofit groups, new fees and other revenue sources.

Several local legislators said they were uncomfortable setting aside money for any new agency at a time when the counties are already considering cutting services to deal with their budgetary struggles.

Some officials also said local hospitals, which are largely exempt from local property taxes, should cover the costs of the new agency.

While local hospitals have agreed to provide a number of in-kind services for the new agency, officials said they did not want to spend any money.

Dean Browning, chairman of Lehigh's commissioners, said that's wrong.

"If they want the bi-county health department, they should be willing to put their money where their mouth is," he said.

Angle criticized volunteers who presented the proposal for not giving enough detail.

"This ... is borderline pitiful," he said.

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