

\$400 million bond bill for new Holyoke Soldiers' Home clears 2nd legislative committee

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HOLYOKE — With just six days to go before a deadline to apply for federal financing for a new Soldiers' Home in Holyoke, a \$400 million bond bill cleared its second legislative committee Friday.

The Joint Committee on Bonding, Capital Expenditures and State Assets polled its 21 members Friday afternoon and the bill passed by a wide margin. The milestone cleared the way for the proposal's debate by the full House next week, according to state Rep. Joseph Wagner, D-Chicopee, second assistant majority leader.

"I am comfortable that we are moving this along a timeline that will allow us to make a timely application to the federal government for funding for this reconstruction project," Wagner said.

The bill will proceed to the Senate, and to Gov. Charlie Baker's desk for final approval. The state is under the gun to file an application for funding to the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs by April 15 for up to \$260 million in financial aid. The final deadline, on Aug. 1, requires detailed plans from the state.

The big-ticket proposal is a product of the disastrous impact of COVID-19 on the Soldiers' Home. At least 77 residents died of the virus, more were sickened and upwards of 80 staff also contracted the disease. The crisis prompted widespread calls for reform, including for a new home.

The current, 1950s-era state-run facility and its cramped rooms housing more than 240 veterans were among the factors blamed for the death toll at the home. An independent report commissioned by Baker cited infrastructure, longstanding staffing deficits

and poor leadership as the toxic brew contributing to the downfall of the home during the pandemic.

In the aftermath, its leadership was gutted, its governance questioned and two of its top staff were indicted for criminal neglect. Former Superintendent Bennett Walsh and onetime medical director Dr. David Clinton have denied 10 criminal charges each, and face decades in prison.

Although the April 15 deadline for the state to complete an application for federal funds is bearing down, state officials and lawmakers now say the application and the bond bill are not linked. That deadline followed an April 1 deadline the Baker administration set for the bond bill to be approved, which passed without consequence.

Lawmakers and state officials say the April 15 deadline similarly will pass without consequences to the bill, so long as the two-page application is submitted to Veterans' Affairs in time.

"The best way to describe the April 1 and April 15 deadlines — they were really nothing more than ideal and aspirational deadlines from the administration," said state Sen. John Velis, a Westfield Democrat aggressively out front on the bond bill. "Do I think the administration is going to get their application in by April 15? My response is absolute and unambiguous yes."

Despite some pushback from legislators in other parts of the state around regional equity and labor agreements, the bond bill was voted on favorably by the bonding committee: 17 in favor, two unresponsive and two reserving their votes. The tally of

which members voted which way was not immediately available.

Wagner said he believes the secondary skirmishes over the bill will not impede its ultimate success, as it remains a front-burner issue for the Baker administration and the majority of the Legislature.

“While they may not be mutually exclusive things, the movement of the bond authorization has an urgency associated with it,” he said, referring to the regional equity and labor debates. “It is separate and distinct enough that we can discuss other things going forward.”

A spokesperson for the Baker administration confirmed the April 15 deadline will not hinder progression of the bill.

Next stop for the bill is the House Ways and Means Committee, with a debate on the House floor on April 14. The Senate has yet to schedule its own consideration of the bill. Senate President Karen Spilka and House Speaker Ronald Mariano released a joint statement on the topic Friday afternoon.

“As part of the process to secure federal funding, the House next week, and the Senate in the coming weeks, will act on legislation to approve a bond authorization for the construction of an updated Holyoke Soldiers’ Home facility,” they said.

“At the same time, we recognize that in order to truly provide the services our veterans deserve, we must build on our previous work to reform the statewide

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structure and governance system for veterans’ homes and services,” the lawmakers continued. “Therefore, we are committed to advancing reforms this session to modernize our service model, and the state’s role in overseeing these services, to more effectively meet the needs of the changing veteran population while recognizing the need for regional equity.”

Parallel to the bond bill debate, there is a special oversight committee probing the Soldiers’ Home outbreak with a separate goal of analyzing what went wrong and measures to avoid a repeat of the deadly outbreak.

The committee on Tuesday will hold its ninth hearing, featuring Paul Moran, chief of staff for former Secretary of Veterans’ Services Francisco Urena, who was pushed out amid the pandemic. The nature of Moran’s proposed testimony is unclear.

The oversight committee also pushed off a March 31 deadline to issue a report on its findings.

“The Special Joint Oversight Committee, led by Chairs (state Rep.) Linda Campbell and (state Sen.) Michael Rush, is currently conducting a thoughtful investigation into the circumstances surrounding this tragedy. The Commission will complete its work soon and we will do the necessary due diligence to advance their recommendations into law,” the statement from Spilka and Mariano concluded.