

# Norristown, not East Norriton, the best site for Einstein to build

Einstein Health Care's plan to build a hospital at "Woody's" (Wood's Golf Center) in East Norriton will change the township forever. Yet, there has not been the type of public discourse that one expects to accompany a decision that affects the health-care access, quality of life, economic well-being, and lives of tens of thousands of people.

Whitpain Township's citizens rejected Einstein when they attempted to build in their township even though zoning relief was already granted. They did not want the congestion, helicopters, cost, noise and sprawl, which are the inevitable consequences of a suburban hospital. Einstein is currently conducting their "quiet" sell, and East Norriton officials have predictably voiced their support. These steps are intended to dampen resistance and stop the public outcry that was so effective in Whitpain.

The Whitpain site encompassed 84 acres and 1.91 million square feet of proposed buildings. Woody's 80 acres is accessible by one, already-congested, county-owned road, and the amount of square footage proposed is still unknown. The nearest public transit is a bus stop 1.5 miles away, at Penn Square shopping center. If the hospital is built, Germantown Pike, North Wales and Whitehall Roads will be overwhelmed with traffic, and eventually these roads will be widened at taxpayers' expense. The sewer plant will also be unable to handle the inevitable development, and a few years down the road, taxpayers will foot that bill too. Two words sum up the water supply situation — boil advisory.

The hospital-related businesses that Norristown loses will locate in East Norriton. These businesses will lead to pressure on the Norristown Farm Park, which has been farmland since the 1730s. The hospital's presence will most likely lead to development along the park's eastern border, and the opening of through roads. These changes will completely alter the character of the park, and be very difficult to prevent, because the park is not permanently protected open space.

The township's and county's 2005 Open Space Plans both list Woody's as a "high priority" site for open-space preservation. Hospitals attract businesses, which when combined with scant public transit, scarce pedestrian access, and inadequate road capacity, will result in sprawl, congestion and even more development. Building the hospital on a "green" suburban site, when an urban alternative is available, violates every "smart growth" principal recommended by planners as diverse as Prince Charles, the Brookings Institute and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Einstein has stated that Montgomery Hospital currently serves about 8,000 patients yearly, and that their goal is 16,000. They didn't say, however, why this couldn't be accomplished on an expanded site in Norristown? One has to wonder... what is the calculus Einstein used to determine that a suburban location will increase their patient base, but a Norristown location won't? Einstein said the move is based on

## Commentary



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an "extensive" market study. This "study" deserves public scrutiny, in part, because it may have drawn false conclusions.

But wait, one might say. Don't they need at least 40 acres of land, or even more, such as the 80 acres they are seeking at Woody's? The answer to that question is a resounding "No!" Many excellent, even larger, hospitals have much less land. These include Thomas Jefferson Hospital (13 acres/925 beds), Bryn Mawr Hospital (8 acres/320 beds), and Pittsburgh's Allegheny General Hospital (11 acres, 819 beds). A land-use and planning analysis, that I recently shared with Einstein, identified an 18 acre site in Norristown that easily meets their needs.

The hospital's move out of Norristown will result in plummeting tax revenues and soaring vacancies. The economic boost of projects such as Logan Square, Lafayette Street, new parking structures and other downtown and riverfront improvements will be all but nullified. Yet, no plan has emerged after more than two years of study to devise an after-the-hospital-leaves scenario.

To put it simply, Montgomery Hospital can "make or break" the economic future of Norristown, merely by deciding to leave or stay. Since they have apparently chosen to leave, we as residents, of all the effected communities, deserve to hear their soundly rational argument — one not based in prejudices and veiled by erroneous presumptions.

What if Einstein chose to work with East Norriton, Norristown, Montgomery County and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to keep Woody's as open space, the Farm Park protected, East Norriton's character intact, and a positive future for Norristown? With an expanded hospital as an anchor, Norristown can once again be a destination for culture, health care, recreation and jobs that contributes to the quality of life of all of Montgomery County. If an approach is taken that is creative, inclusive and forward-looking, this dream can be real. It can happen if Einstein makes the choice to build in Norristown, our county seat — the heart of Montgomery County.

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