

By Brian Leaf

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Ald. Venita Hervey delays vote on \$485M MercyRockford hospital

ROCKFORD — Ald. Venita Hervey said she thinks Javon R. Bea was bluffing when he said he'd [move a massive hospital campus to Wisconsin](#) if the City Council didn't pass an agreement Monday to bring 263 acres of prime land into city borders.

And now she'll find out.

Hervey used a procedural move to delay by two weeks a vote on an annexation agreement that would have allowed MercyRockford Health System to immediately begin work on its proposed \$485 million hospital campus near Interstate 90 and East Riverside Boulevard.

"We are reviewing our options," said MercyRockford spokeswoman Barb Bortner by text message, 90 minutes after the vote.

Bea, president and CEO of MercyRockford, did not attend the meeting.

"I am very excited to move forward on our East Riverside hospital and medical center project as we raise the level of healthcare quality and bring job development and economic growth to the Rockford region," Bea said in a news release that the city issued about two hours after the City Council adjourned. "Since Rockford is my hometown, this is personally a dream come true to bring our medical campus development to Rockford."

While annexation was delayed, aldermen voted 11-2 vote with one abstention for rezoning from agricultural to commercial the 263 acres where MercyRockford wants to build its campus. The property was purchased by [Rockford Health System 18 years ago](#) and set aside for new facilities. Rockford Mayor Larry Morrissey read the rezoning vote as a political tea leaf that bodes well for ultimate approval of the project in two weeks.

"We want them to know how strongly the large majority of the council supports the project," said Morrissey.

"This is a temporary delay."

But the annexation isn't likely to get unanimous approval if Hervey, D-5, is at the meeting. She was [against the new hospital](#) from the moment MercyRockford proposed building it. She said it would disrupt the city's balance of health care services, shifting them away the west side's poor residents who rely on MercyRockford's Rockton Avenue hospital. Before last year's merger of Mercy and Rockford Health System, the west Rockford hospital was known as Rockford Memorial.

Last week, Bea threatened to move the hospital campus to Beloit in a letter he sent to aldermen. Development of the proposed hospital campus would create 1,100 temporary construction jobs, 400 full-time health care jobs and tens of millions of dollars in increased spending in the region. It would all go to Beloit if the city didn't cut building permits from \$1.8 million to \$900,000. City negotiators balked, saying they needed the full amount to offset increased fire and ambulance costs the new hospital would require.

Hervey said she didn't appreciate hardball tactics employed by Bea.

"I believe it's bullying and I believe when you face a bully you don't roll over and show your underbelly," Hervey said. "I believe you stand up to the bully and tell them no."

Negotiators from MercyRockford and the city [reached an accord Thursday](#) under which the city would cut the health system's permit fees to \$900,000. In exchange, MercyRockford would increase acreage for tax-producing commercial property from 20 to 60 acres and develop a hotel with 80 or more rooms on its property within two years.

Hervey's motion to postpone the annexation vote was seconded by Ald. Linda McNeely, D-13. State law allows two aldermen to delay a vote on a matter the first time it is brought to the City Council floor.

"The behavior shown by Ald. Hervey and McNeely is truly a disgrace, not only to the residents of Rockford but also to the city," said Bortner, who said MercyRockford would look forward to coming back to the Council.

"It's a little disappointing," said Ald. Kevin Frost, R-4, whose ward would include the proposed hospital campus. "I think everyone was ready to work out an agreement."

It appears that aldermen and MercyRockford will now wait until March 21 to vote on the agreement.

Brian Leaf: 815-987-1363; bleaf@rrstar.com; [@b_leaf](https://twitter.com/b_leaf)



MercyRockford Health System used this display at a zoning hearing Wednesday to show how it might develop 263 acres at Interstate 90 and East Riverside Boulevard into a \$485 million hospital campus. PHOTO PROVIDED

