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Interview: Del. Joanne Benson

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# Can Maryland Public Hospital Be Saved?

*Here are excerpts from an interview with Maryland state Delegate Joanne C. Benson (D-Dist. 24), on the fight to save Prince Georges County Hospital. The interview was conducted by telephone, by Patricia Salisbury, on Dec. 6.*



**EIR:** Delegate Benson, the recent special session of the Maryland State Legislature has brought the issue of the Prince Georges County Hospital system into focus, with frequent reports on a financial crisis, and even the possibility that the very existence of the hospital is in jeopardy.

**Benson:** Now let me tell you, the Prince Georges County Hospital system, which is managed by Dimensions Healthcare, is a hospital system that last year serviced 180,000 people. The vast majority of the people that were serviced, used the emergency room as a primary care provider because they had nowhere else to go. And we are talking about people who are sick. The Dimensions System is the only hospital system that is owned by a county in the state of Maryland.

**EIR:** So, it is a public hospital system?

**Benson:** Yes, it is. The hospital has been in trouble for the past ten years, and each year a band-aid approach has been used to try to fix the problem. It has not worked.

... We are talking about a shock trauma center where the survival rate of persons brought into shock trauma is somewhere around 85%. It is among the highest in the nation.... They have a pre-natal unit that is among the best in the state. So we are not talking about a hospital where you have people—doctors and nurses and staff—who don't care about the hospital.

The problem, as we see it, and I sit on the Health and Government Operations Committee, is that we need another approach in trying to deal with this hospital. We need to come up with an authority that is going to manage this hospital in such a way that the state will buy in, and the county will buy in. In other words, it's been very, very difficult for all parties involved to sit down at the table, and come up with a solution to

save this hospital, but it can be done. Last year, we began to work, starting with the [legislative] session in January, on how we could best save this hospital, and get the hospital on its feet. We asked the county and the county executive to come up with a plan. . . . When the county and county executive did not produce a plan, we did not want it to be like the year before, when we had to come up at the ninth hour and beg for \$6 million to keep the hospital afloat. And so when they did not come up with a plan, we came up with one of our own.

**EIR:** And could you tell me what that was?

**Benson:** The main feature of the plan was to initiate an authority that would be persons chosen by the governor and by the county executive to manage the hospital, because not only are we talking about 180,000 people who use the hospital, we are talking about 2,400 people who work at the hospital. The main feature of the authority would be to come up with a plan to find the financial means. In the last bill, the State of Maryland was going to put up \$175 million, and another sum was to be put up by the county. And at the ninth hour, the county council backed out, which put us back to square one. So this year, we are going to come up with the same kind of bill.

Let me go back for a minute. The Hospital Dimensions system was formed in 1982, and it was formed because the county government said they could not manage the hospital. . . . And so, the hospital has been in trouble for the past eight to ten years. We have had a loss of everything—poor bond ratings, loss of a market share. Nothing but problems. . . . What we are talking about here is a hospital that has been limping along.

**EIR:** And has its plant, equipment, and services deteriorated over that period?

**Benson:** I don't think that services have. The one saving grace for us, and we ought to be extremely grateful, is that the vast majority of the people that work at the hospital are not necessarily there for the money. . . . We have a number of doctors and nurses who are there because of their commitment to the kinds of people that come there. . . . The hospital staff, they have been incredible, really and truly. . . . It is the financial piece that is creating the problem.

**EIR:** And your legislation in the upcoming session—is this an attempt to reassert the public control of the hospital and eliminate the kind of middle-man management?

**Benson:** That is exactly what we are trying to do. We want to create a hospital authority.

**EIR:** In a way, your proposal seems to go against the trend to step back from the public management, or even public oversight of health care, to bring in private companies which, in the conditions of economic crisis, are not serving to improve health care.

**Benson:** The focus here is dealing with the financial piece, bringing some order and credibility to the hospital. . . . We will have the hospital authority, which will be a state-sponsored, not-for-profit entity, and we are going to be governed by a board of directors who will be chosen by the governor and the county executive. And the prime purpose of the authority will be to develop a long-term solution to the problems we face with the hospital.

**EIR:** And as I understand it, the state and county, like so many around the country, are in financial crisis.

**Benson:** Yes, they are.

**EIR:** The question is, will any authority created be able to accomplish the job of prioritizing the needs of the hospital and the people it serves in this collapsing financial situation. I know that proposals have been made in terms of the amount of money needed by the hospital. What, in your view, is needed financially?

**Benson:** What we thought we would do is to have the county and the state put up money. The state agreed to put up \$158 million, because in order for us to do what really needs to be done, we need a little over \$300 million. Up to \$335 million.

**EIR:** Can you spell out what that money is actually needed for?

**Benson:** Well, you know we have a bond debt, and we need to deal with the pensions of the workers. We are gravely concerned about that, and [about] a modernization of the facility or building a brand new facility. Because all the health facilities that come under the umbrella of Dimensions are in dire need of upgrade. And of course, the operating costs. . . . We, the legislators, the people in Prince Georges County, are in adamant 100% opposition to the closing of the hospital. . . .

Now, we just came up with another health bill here, and included in that bill is this: Money will be allocated to the hospital, but in the form of \$300 million under one condition—that the county executive and the county council come up with, and hammer out an agreement, because they are the stumbling block. We are not going to fool around with them this year. . . . We have all this political foolishness going on which is keeping us from coming up with a peaceful solution to this problem. So this year, we are going to put a bill in. . . . Because let's face it, if this hospital were to close, it would have a ripple effect all over the great State of Maryland. . . .

**EIR:** How soon do you think the issue will be joined there?

**Benson:** We are going to bring this bill in as an emergency bill, and it will be a top priority piece for the Prince Georges County delegation in January. . . .