

Trauma center officials fear veto of bill

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News-Press Fort Myers

Gov. Bush may have concerns over distribution

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A rumor that Gov. Jeb Bush might veto a bill that would provide \$1 million to Lee County's **trauma center** sent a ripple of concern among hospital administrators this week.

At risk is Senate Bill 1762 - passed by lawmakers April 30 - which provides \$22 million to be divided among the state's 20 trauma centers, with the remaining \$2 million going to trauma research and a study of each center's needs.

"We've known for three days there were serious concerns in the governor's office," said Keith Arnold, a government consultant for Lee Memorial Health System, which houses Southwest Florida's only **trauma center**.

"We know the governor is not satisfied with the distribution of the dollars to trauma," he said. "He would like a solution that is more comprehensive - as we would - but we are urging him to take this now, and we'll work with him in the interim."

Bush spokeswoman Alia Faraj said she couldn't confirm the governor's stance on any particular bill.

Lee County's **trauma center** needs roughly \$10 million per year to operate, and a bundle of money from a variety of sources is providing about \$6 million in promised money next year, with Lee Memorial picking up the rest.

The \$1 million in anticipated money from the state was included in that bundle.

Lee Memorial's President Jim Nathan sent a letter to Bush on Tuesday, beseeching the governor to reconsider.

Nathan said he understands Bush's concerns about equitably funding the state's trauma centers, but said vetoing this bill could harm the system's efforts to stabilize the center and retain physicians.

"The timing is really, really bad as we try to make sure we've got staffing and momentum in the right direction," he said. "Vetoing that decision would cause the question: Is the state really serious about trying to work with hospitals and physicians to protect the viability of trauma?"

Lee Memorial has been struggling for the past two years to keep the cash-draining **trauma center** open without any public tax support.

Only in the past year did the system stave off closure when physicians threatened to walk and again when there weren't enough neurosurgeons to cover trauma.

But federal grant programs, local donations and the promised funding from the state helped stabilize the **trauma center**, Arnold said.

"This would be a huge financial and psychological setback that would take us awhile to overcome," he said.