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Patronage is key to wrangling over top hospital job

By Ed Tagliaferri
Staff Writer

The power struggle over who will be Westchester's new hospitals commissioner has little to do with medicine and much to do with who will control the county's largest department and potential patronage mill.

"It's over who's going to control the employment

agency we call Westchester County Medical Center," said Legislator Stephen Tenore, R-New Rochelle.

The main antagonists are three of the county's most powerful Republicans: County Executive Andrew O'Rourke, who is supposed to pick the commissioner and wants it to be his

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choice; county GOP Chairman Anthony Colavita, who has often clashed with O'Rourke over top county jobs; and Edward Brady, former chairman of the Board of Legislators, who is trying to maintain the tight grip he had on the county-run hospital when he ruled the board.

The tug of war also extends beyond county borders, involving a U.S. and state senator and possibly a cardinal.

Ultimately, though, it is a battle of wills — O'Rourke's, Colavita's and Brady's — for influence over a department that, with 3,600 workers, employs more than one-third of the county work force.

It's O'Rourke's call

At the center of the struggle is O'Rourke, empowered by the County Charter to pick Bernard Weinstein's successor in the \$141,120-a-year job of hospitals commissioner.

When Weinstein retired in January, O'Rourke proposed Deputy Commissioner Edward Stolzenberg as a temporary replacement and ordered a \$50,000 nationwide search for candidates.

A county legislative committee voted April 26 to reject Stolzenberg as acting commissioner, based, not on his qualifications, but on lobbying. The whole board is expected to vote on it today.

The search has produced eight semifinalists, but no nominee. While O'Rourke has firmly supported Stolzenberg as an interim leader, he has made no

commitment beyond that.

But it seems as if everyone else has a choice.

U.S. Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, R-N.Y., and state Sen. Guy Velella, R-Bronx, have both lobbied O'Rourke on behalf of Leonard Piccoli, Velella's chief of staff.

D'Amato is sponsoring O'Rourke for a federal judgeship, and Velella represents parts of southern Westchester and is Bronx GOP chairman.

Piccoli is the former executive director of Bronx Municipal Hospital and the now-defunct Fordham Hospital and was real estate and transportation director for St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center.

Brady's power base

Stolzenberg's strongest supporter is Brady, R-Thornwood, who has made it clear to O'Rourke and colleagues that the acting commissioner should be made permanent.

The Valhalla medical center is a base of power for Brady, even though he no longer controls the board, according to Minority Leader Sandra Galef.

During his years as either the board's majority leader or chairman, Brady championed the hospital's expansion and upgrading, gaining supporters among the staff, she said.

Since his ouster as board chairman in January 1990, Brady has fought to hold his power and influence. Few departments carry more clout than the medical center.

Of the 3,600 jobs there, about 1,000 are the type of white- and

blue-collar jobs that political power brokers use for patronage.

Brady dismisses all the talk of lobbying, saying it's blown out of proportion.

Colavita wants a say

The third side of the triangle, GOP Chairman Colavita, also hasn't decided whom to support. But he wants a say.

After years of feeling ignored by O'Rourke in the selection of top commissioners, Colavita wants in on this one.

"If I see someone on that list that's qualified ... I would be glad to recommend someone," he said.

Colavita said he makes a lot of recommendations, but "More often than not, they're not appointed."

While O'Rourke insists he has remained above this political fray, two recent curious moves appear to undermine Stolzenberg.

First, O'Rourke gave Tenore a copy of an unflattering 12-year-old newspaper article about Stolzenberg. Then he told Guy Parisi, the county board's attorney, of a conversation he had had with Cardinal John O'Connor concerning Stolzenberg.

Parisi said O'Rourke told him the cardinal was lobbying for Stolzenberg. O'Rourke insists that he thought Tenore already had a copy of the article. As for telling Parisi about his conversation with O'Connor, O'Rourke said he was just recounting a compliment paid to Stolzenberg. O'Connor has declined to discuss the conversation.