

Inside the political fight to build a rural Georgia hospital

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Ed Whitehouse stood alongside a state highway in rural Butts County, Georgia, and surveyed acres of rolling fields and forests near Interstate 75. Instead of farmland and trees, he envisioned a hospital.

Whitehouse, a consultant for a local health care company that wants to build a hospital there with at least 150 beds, said the group could break ground within a year. The idea, he said, is to provide medical services beyond those currently provided by Wellstar Sylvan Grove Medical Center, an aging, nonprofit "critical access" hospital that offers limited services, including [emergency care](#), rehabilitation, wound care, and imaging.

But it took a new law, pushed by the state's powerful Republican lieutenant governor, Burt Jones, to clear the way for construction. The land is partly owned by his father, Bill Jones, a successful businessman whose interest in developing a hospital in his home county drew attention from state Democrats and the hospital industry.

The situation has been portrayed as "this billionaire entrepreneur, Bill Jones, exploiting the legal system through his son, imposing his will on people and trying to cash in," Whitehouse said. "Nothing could be further from the truth."

Woven through the drama in Butts County are arcane but consequential rules that require state approval for hospital construction and expansion. The rules, used nearly nationwide until the 1980s, require potential builders to apply for permission for new projects. State officials evaluate need based on criteria such as population growth and existing hospital capacity.

This year, Georgia lawmakers joined several other states in targeting those "certificate of need," or CON, regulations for dramatic change. Some states have exempted certain medical providers from the process; others have been more dramatic, including South Carolina, which is sunsetting most of its rules.

Attempts to pave the way for a new hospital in Butts County show how

debate over certificate of need laws can intensify as legislatures try to reconcile the often conflicting priorities of politicians, the health care industry, and communities.

The laws have been criticized for limiting competition, and some health care analysts, like Matthew Mitchell, a senior research fellow at West Virginia University, feel everyday people may get the short end of the stick.

"This kind of a regulation is often there because powerful businesses want them," Mitchell said, "not because they protect consumers."

Bill Jones, a 79-year-old former state legislator, supported a 2022 legislative push to open a new hospital in Butts County. But the effort ran into formidable opposition from Wellstar Health System, which operates Sylvan Grove and 10 other hospitals in Georgia.

"As a nonprofit health system, we are always exploring partnerships that expand our mission of enhancing well-being in the communities we serve," said Matthew O'Connor, a Wellstar spokesperson. "Our analysis indicates that another hospital in this area is not needed at this time."

This year, Georgia Democrats thought they could leverage Republicans' interest in loosening the rules to gain support for Medicaid expansion. But Democrats were outnumbered in the legislature, and lawmakers eased several rules without that trade-off.

For example, certain hospital projects in rural counties are now exempt. Jones' project and his home county look likely to benefit.

Burt Jones, Georgia's lieutenant governor, who is being investigated for his role as a fake elector for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election, maintains his push for changes to the rules isn't about helping

his father.

"It will give people access to health care in a reasonable travel time and convenience for them as well," Burt Jones said.

Bill Jones has used Butts County as the home base to build his business network, which includes petroleum distribution, retail convenience stores, and fast-food restaurants. In a recent interview, he complained about media coverage of his son's legislative connection to the hospital project.

He said his interest in opening another local hospital is about community need and, at least in part, stems from his personal experience. His wife gets medical services at Emory Healthcare, more than 40 miles away in Atlanta.

"You're not going to get the attention you need medically" at the 25-bed Sylvan Grove hospital in Jackson, he said. "Health care ought not to be about politics."

But the lieutenant governor had to be somewhat aware that legislation he was pushing could be seen as financially benefiting a close family member, said Josh McLaurin, a Democratic state senator whose district runs from Atlanta into its northern suburbs. Fellow members of the Democratic Party were encouraged to support the certificate of need bill, even though the GOP has a majority in the Georgia Legislature, he said.

"If they want Democrats on board on a bill they could probably pass without our votes, that tends to suggest that there's a concern about the narrative," McLaurin said.

Hospital industry lobbyists, aware of the Jones-Butts County connection,

watched the debate with fear of wholesale repeal of the certificate of need laws, which ultimately didn't happen.

The final bill doesn't name Butts County specifically. But it does exempt "a new general acute care hospital in a rural county" from having to obtain a certificate of need. With a population of about 27,000, Butts County meets the definition of "rural" outlined in Georgia law.

Now, the small local company for which Whitehouse works—Interstate Health Systems, which is partly owned by Bill Jones—is moving forward. Land is being cleared for medical office buildings, potentially to lure providers to the area.

Whitehouse said major hospital systems already operating in Georgia are interested in partnering on construction and operation of a new facility.

Members of the Butts County Hospital Authority, which oversees Sylvan Grove, declined to comment. But last year, county commissioners passed a resolution encouraging the hospital authority to pursue a new facility.

Byrd Garland, a retired attorney and former hospital authority member, said he'd appreciate any project that gives people local access to health care, "so they don't have to drive an hour or two hours to get to it."

Garland said he's received both good and bad care at Sylvan Grove, and sometimes would rather make the trek to Atlanta to a better-resourced [hospital](#).

"You get that kind of mindset when you've grown up out here in this medical desert that we're in now," he said.

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