

TIM NELSON: It's 12:08. This is *Minnesota Now*. And I'm Tim Nelson. A proposed merger of two major health care organizations is going on the road, as attorney General Keith Ellison hosts public comment sessions on the combination of South Dakota-based Sanford Health and Fairview Health Services in the Twin Cities.

The first session was in St. Paul last night. NPR News Health Reporter Michelle Wiley was there and joins me now. Thanks for joining us.

MICHELLE Thank you.

WILEY:

TIM NELSON: So I hear last night's hearing drew quite a crowd. Who was there?

MICHELLE Yeah, it was actually standing room only at the event. So I was sitting on the floor in a corner. But there were people from all over. Many were health care workers who are from Fairview hospitals. There were folks who work at the University of Minnesota Medical Center and other facilities, union leaders, some Sanford staff that actually came from Bemidji to talk about the proposed merger-- so people from all over came out.

TIM NELSON: Now, this deal got announced back in November and there's been some concerns about how it would affect health care in the state. What questions did folks raise last night?

MICHELLE Yeah, there were a lot of concerns raised. For one, many people at the event last night wanted more of a commitment that things like gender-affirming care and reproductive rights would remain something that is supported and provided if this combination moves forward. South Dakota has, obviously, a different legal landscape. Abortion there is banned except in cases where it's necessary to save the pregnant person's life.

And people want assurances that if Sanford takes over, that Minnesota's abortion laws will be followed. There's also the issue of unions. Listeners likely remember we just came off of months of negotiations with the Minnesota Nurses Association over contracts, which Fairview was a part of. There's concern that if this merger happens, that contract won't be recognized and union members will have to go back to the bargaining table and start from scratch.

Now, the leader of Sanford Health, Bill Gassen was at the event last night and said the company would continue to support reproductive care, gender-affirming care, that they would respect the bargaining agreements. But I think a lot of this concern really stems from the fact that there hasn't been a lot of concrete information about the terms of the merger that the public has seen.

I should say there were supporters of the proposed merger there last night-- the CEOs of Fairview and Sanford, as I mentioned, were in attendance and said the combination would create a lot of opportunities for more clinical trials, better patient care, expanding access to care. Some audience members also said they've seen care in places like Bemidji improve since Sanford moved in.

TIM NELSON: Now, remember, they went through this a decade or so ago. And one of the big issues back then was what would happen with the University of Minnesota's Medical Center, which has an affiliation with Fairview. Did that come up last night?

MICHELLE WILEY: Yeah. One of the more surprising moments last night was Sanford officials said there is an option on the table for the U to buy back the academic medical center from the combined system. Now, I saw it in a statement to the *Star Tribune*, the university indicated that the original sale agreement doesn't give them the right to buy back the hospital in the event of a merger or other change of control at Fairview.

So it's a little unclear still. And last night at the event, Dean of the Medical School Jakub Tolar said they don't want this merger to move forward until they resolve these issues and others.

JAKUB TOLAR: The merger, as currently advanced by Fairview and Sanford, treats the university and its academic mission as a separate and independent question. I'm here to respectfully ask that your office, Minnesota legislature, the governor, and all Minnesotans treat the future of academic medicine at the University of Minnesota as the central question.

TIM NELSON: Now, as I recall, that was one of the sticking points last time. And then the legislature got involved. They really sort of killed this deal off last time. How restive are lawmakers this time around?

MICHELLE WILEY: I think that's the question. It's difficult to say what the exact feeling is. But there was an op-ed published in the *Star Tribune* last month authored by three legislators, including the chair of the House of Representatives Health Finance and Policy Committee that said that they'd be looking closely at the deal, and aspects of it may be a problem for them.

I spoke to Attorney General Keith Ellison last night after the event, and he said along with these public listening sessions, his office is also doing their own investigation-- something that's internal and confidential at the moment-- and that the AG's office's review, along with what they get from the public, will help them decide how and if they should intervene in the proposed deal.

And for folks wondering when that decision will be made, Ellison said he expects it sometime around the end of the month. But there are several listening sessions scheduled throughout January, so a lot of information coming in.

TIM NELSON: Well, that's NPR News Health Reporter Michelle Wiley. Michelle, thanks for the update. We look forward to your coverage of this merger going forward.

MICHELLE WILEY: Thanks so much.