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Dwight Ball confident PET scanner commitment in Corner Brook will be met

Diane Crocker

Former premier says he was not part of discussions to put equipment on hold or delay purchase AA CORNER BROOK, N.L. -

Before he was even premier, Dwight Ball made a commitment as leader of the Opposition that a Liberal government would expand cancer care services in the province and put a radiation unit and a PET scanner in the acute care hospital to be built in Corner Brook.

That commitment was made in 2014, long before construction started. The hospital is scheduled to be completed in 2023.

It's a commitment Ball is confident will be met.

On Thursday, Ball told SaltWire Network there was research and analysis conducted before he made the commitment and it was about more than just Western Memorial Regional Hospital.

"This was an extension of the provincial cancer care program," he said.

He said it was about having backup and no interruption in services should something happen to equipment in St. John's, and it was about minimizing the need for people on the west coast to travel to obtain cancer care. Ball said it could even provide another option for the rest of Atlantic Canada.

"I was never part of any discussions that would have put this PET scanner on hold or delay." – Dwight Ball

He said it was always intended that once the radiation therapy unit was in place, a PET scanner or a newer, better piece of diagnostic equipment would be included.

"Whatever this radiation clinic requires in diagnostic imaging at the time, well then that is what will go in to support the radiation program in Corner Brook," he said.

Ball has been following the issue since Health Minister Dr. John Haggie said in early January there would be no PET scanner in the new hospital, and the need for it would be assessed later. Corner Brook MHA Gerry Byrne has said there will be a PET scanner at the hospital when doctors say it's needed.

"I was concerned about it, because I knew that this commitment was made with a lot of work and lot of people involved in it," Ball said.

"I was never part of any discussions that would have put this PET scanner on hold or delay."

ICYMI: What is a PET scanner and what will it do at the new Corner Brook Hospital | The Telegram <https://t.co/AHNeOrh11J>
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– The Telegram (@StJohnsTelegram) January 20, 2021

Right before the provincial election was called the government announced it was putting \$2 million in trust with the Western Regional Hospital Foundation toward a PET scanner for the new hospital.

But that didn't convince the Western Regional Hospital Action Committee that the original commitment would be honoured in a timely manner.

The committee wanted to discuss their concerns with Liberal Leader Andrew Furey. Ball was there on Jan. 18 when they met on Furey's campaign bus in Corner Brook.

He said he understood, coming out of that meeting, that there was an agreement to put a down payment on a PET scanner that could then be ordered 12 weeks before it was needed.

Ball said provincial law requires the government to follow a procurement process for the purchase, but that could start immediately and be completed within a matter of months.

"It was never meant to be waiting years and years and years for this. You get in there, you start putting your program in place and the program would involve radiation and PET scanning imaging here.

"This was always my plan and I know the premier has said we're going to honour the plan that was put in place."

Ball's recollection of the meeting matches that of action committee co-chair Gerald Parsons.

After the meeting, the committee emailed Furey and offered some leeway, suggesting the supplier be directed to deliver the PET scanner 12 weeks before the radiation unit is operational, instead of before the hospital is finished, as was first discussed.

The committee wanted that commitment confirmed by Furey.

On Tuesday, it received a letter that stated, "While government is honouring the original commitment of former Premier Ball, my administration has taken that commitment several steps further. We have given the Health Foundation the money needed to purchase the PET scanner, directed them to begin the process of securing the appropriate model and securing its purchase with a down payment."

Parsons said that doesn't specify when the machine will be in place.

"There's no timeline there, that's the thing."

The letter also states, "As soon as the cancer care doctors and members of the foundation indicate they are ready to purchase the equipment best suited for the hospital and patients, a down payment will be made to secure the scanner."

Parsons said that's different than what was agreed to.

He said he doesn't know where the idea to have doctors make the decision came from. He said he hopes he's wrong, but the government is pushing the issue down the road.

Ball said he has a lot of respect for the committee and appreciates its concern.

"They were instrumental in helping getting this where it is today.

"They want to see this delivered like it was meant to be.... We're not waiting years for this, and people don't deserve to wait years for this."

Ball said he believes that when the hospital's radiation unit is ready, there will be a PET scanner in place.

Diane Crocker reports on west coast news.

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