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Tentative deal averts nurses' strike

By VICTORIA BARONE Times Observer Staff Writer

Registered nurses and social workers at Warren General Hospital reached a tentative contract agreement with the hospital early Wednesday morning, ending the threat of an Oct. 4 strike.

The union membership will vote on the contract Thursday.

On Sept. 23, members of WGH Professional Employees Association (the local chapter of Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals) voted to authorize a strike, giving the hospital administration 10-day notice that they would strike on Oct. 4 if a contract agreement had not been reached. Negotiations began in July; the employees' contract expired on Sept. 30.

According to Ellen Edgreen, RN, the union's negotiating team and the hospital reached an agreement at 6 a.m. Wednesday, following a session which began at 9 a.m. Tuesday. "We worked really long and hard on it," Edgreen said. "I think that proves our dedication to the community. We did not want to go on strike unless it was absolutely necessary."

Edgreen said the final issues the bargaining team faced were wages, retirement and nurse to patient ratios.

While declining to comment on specifics of the three-year contract before Thursday's vote, Edgreen said, "It's a contract that we can recommend to our members. I'm hopeful that it's going to pass on Thursday. Hopefully, it's all over with. I appreciate all the amazing amount of community support that we had. It was unbelievable the people that came up to us and supported our stance and believed in us. Our billboards say it all - we want to keep working for you ... We're just trying to make Warren General the best it can possibly be."

Over 97 percent of the registered nurses and social workers voted to approve the strike authorization when the vote was held on Sept. 15.

"There were really two reasons we gave the hospital for the strike warning," Edgreen said. "(The hospital) was not negotiating in a timely fashion. The other reason is that we worked over two months without a contract in the last contract and we were just plain not willing to do that this time. We wanted the contract done and settled by the end of this present contract."

WGH CEO John Papalia said, "Warren General Hospital has confirmed that a tentative agreement has been reached with PASNAP. We anticipate and look forward to ratification of this tentative agreement that will allow us to continue high quality patient care without interruption."