



The Littleton Weekly Record

THURSDAY, OCT. 30, 2025

LOCAL

Bethlehem Fire
Chief Placed On Leave;
Board Mum

FREE



Community Bids Farewell To Cannon Mountain's Second-Generation Tram

- ◆ Cog Rescues More Than 20 Hikers From Mount Washington Summit
- ◆ Fundraiser Launched To Help Infant Battle Rare Heart Condition
- ◆ Boys & Girls Club Of North Country Expanding

Bethlehem Fire Chief Placed On Leave

BY ROBERT BLECHL
Staff Writer

After starting the job in February, Bethlehem's fire chief has been placed on leave, the Select Board announced on Monday.

To date, no details on the reason have been provided.

John Galloway, a Woodstock native who previously served as the chief of the Sunapee Fire Department and Emergency Medical Services before coming to Bethlehem, was hired by the Bethlehem board in January, with an effective start date of Feb. 18.

At the outset of the Bethlehem Select Board's meeting on Monday, Nancy Strand, chair of the board, read a short statement following what had been a scheduled hour-long non-pub-



John Galloway, hired as Bethlehem's fire chief in January, has been placed on paid administrative leave, the Select Board announced on Monday. No details for the reason were provided. (Contributed photo)

lic session regarding an undisclosed personnel matter.

"We will start the meeting

with a statement," she said. "For the benefit of everyone in the room and those on Zoom, there is a pending personnel matter in the fire department. The fire chief is on paid administrative leave, and we cannot comment further at this time."

Galloway's hire followed the retirement of longtime Bethlehem Fire Chief Jack Anderson, which was planned for Dec. 31.

Galloway was hired after the town had difficulty finding a successor to Anderson, who, while officially retired, stayed on the job a little longer.

In a statement at the time announcing his hire, Bethlehem Select Board members said Galloway comes to Bethlehem with "decades of distinguished service in fire, emergency medical services, and other emergency response services."



On Sunday, after 45 years in operation, the last second-generation tram cars for the public docked in their berths at the base of Cannon Mountain. The state is now advancing the plan for the third-generation aerial tramway. Having ridden as a passenger on the first two generations is Stan Judge, 98, left, who recently retired from the New Hampshire Passenger Tramway Board after more than 60 years. Here, Judge speaks with Executive Councilor Joe Kenney and Cannon Mountain marketing director Jennifer Kaman. (Photo by Robert Blechl)

Community Bids Farewell To Cannon Mountain's Second-Generation Tram

BY ROBERT BLECHL
Staff Writer

FRANCONIA — Sunday marked the end of an era at Cannon Mountain — the retirement, after 45 years, of the second-generation aerial tramway, launched in 1980.

The two-car tram system replaced the first generation, inaugurated 42 years earlier in 1938 as the first passenger tramway in North America.

Having seen both generations in action and been carried to and from the Cannon summit as a passenger is Stan Judge, 98, of Shelburne, who, several months ago, after serving for more than 60 years, retired as a member of the New Hampshire Passenger Tramway Safety Board.

An engineer by vocation and avid skier by avocation, Judge moved to the North Country in 1950 after earning an engineering degree.

He would go on to become president and general manager of Wildcat Mountain while overseeing tramway operations at Cannon Mountain and being involved in Cannon's first-generation replacement process.

He was there when that first generation was still relatively new, and he was present for the 1980 opening of its two-car successor, affectionately called "Ketchup" and "Mustard" because of their colors.

Judge recalled his experiences.

"I was here for the dedication on the first day and rode it and obviously had to ride it on the last day," said Judge, minutes after the

second-gen tram car offering its last public ride docked in its berth at the base of the mountain. "I'm here today to see another transition."

"It's a great day for New Hampshire, a great day that's been coming for several years," said District 1 Executive Councilor Joe Kenney, who was riding the last tram down with District 2 Executive Councilor Karen Liot Hill and some residents who erupted with cheers as they disembarked.

"There's been a lot of engineering designs and conceptual plans and just a lot of thoughts about what it's going to be, whether it's a total replacement or whether it's a restoration project," said Kenney. "So there's still a lot of design and engineering and planning going on."

But after 45 years, the time has come, he said.

"Everyone is excited, the New Hampshire Legislature and Executive Council and governor, about having a plan because it's iconic," said Kenney. "New Hampshire looks at the tram because this used to be the location of the Old Man of the Mountain."

So the state, he said, will be working hard on the third-generation project, which is expected to take about two years.

Each second-generation car has a maximum capacity of 80 people.

The total number of passengers during the last rides on Sunday hit 1,800.

"It was a great turnout," said Jace Wirth, general manager of Cannon Mountain Ski Area and Franconia Notch State Park. "It was a great day here at the tram. It just means so much to the

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ON THE COVER

On Sunday, after 45 years in operation, the last second-generation tram car for the public docked in its berth at the base of Cannon Mountain. The state is now advancing the plan for the third-generation aerial tramway. Photo by Robert Blechl)



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Cog Railway Rescues More Than 20 Hikers From Mount Washington Summit; Separate Search Conducted Sunday Night

STAFF REPORTS

MOUNT WASHINGTON — More than 20 ill-prepared hikers were brought down from the summit of Mount Washington on Saturday amid full winter conditions, according to Cog Railway Assistant General Manager Andy Valaine.

In a public advisory posted Oct. 25, Valaine said many of the hikers were hypothermic and lacked gear suitable for the weather. Some were unaware that summit services were closed for the season, and a few said it was their first hike.

“Summits at or certainly above 4,000 feet have full winter conditions,” Valaine wrote. “This should come as a surprise to no one.”

He urged hikers to research conditions before heading out and to be prepared for severe weather. “Hike Mount Washington like it is any one of the



Snow covered tracks on Mt. Washington's Cog Railway. (Andy Valaine Photo)

other 48 peaks,” he said. “Do not assume services or a ride down. The summit is halfway.”

Lt. Mark Ober with New Hampshire Fish and Game told WMUR that hikers continue to underestimate the dangers. He said a group of Canadian hikers wearing sweatpants and sneakers attempted to enter the Summit Building, which — along with the Mount Washington Auto Road — is closed to the

public for the season.

“It’s literally a life-or-death situation if they go up there unprepared,” Ober told WMUR. “People should not be hiking unless they’re fully prepared. Part of that preparation is doing research and finding out what the conditions are. The Mount Washington Observatory has a great website that tells you up-to-date conditions at the time.”

The warnings came a day before a separate rescue Sunday night, when a Rhode Island man was found stranded near the summit in windblown snow and subfreezing temperatures.

According to New Hampshire Fish and Game, 20-year-old Owen Strommer of Wakefield, R.I., was located about 0.3 miles below the summit on the Tuckerman Ravine Trail after calling for help with a dying phone and headlamp. He was found uninjured but, officials said, “absolutely unprepared” for the conditions.

OBITUARIES

GREGORY JESSEMAN

Gregory “Greg” Harlan Jesseman, 66, of Lisbon, New Hampshire, passed away due to a cardiac event on Sunday, Oct. 12, 2025, at his home. He was born on Jan. 28, 1959, in Littleton, New Hampshire, to Wendell and Erline McBurney Jesseman. Greg spent most of his life in the North Country, where he cherished the quiet beauty of the area and the close bonds of family and friends. Greg was a literal mountain of a man - steady, strong, and extremely devoted



to his family and community. He graduated from Lisbon Regional School, Class of 1977 and was the recipient of the Skimeister award in his senior year. He graduated from Berlin Tech. with a specialty in automotive.

Greg worked at New England Wire Technologies for over 43 years. During this time, he made countless contributions to the Maintenance & Facility team, serving in multiple roles including groundskeeper, maintenance supervisor, facilities manager, and leader of special facility projects. Greg was known for his dedication, hard work, and pride in everything he did.

Greg loved spending time with his family and friends, who meant the world to him. Greg enjoyed snowmobiling, ski racing, water skiing, fishing, hunting, and time spent with family and friends at the family camp on Partridge Lake. His nieces and nephews were a big part of his life. He was often found on the sidelines, cheering, pacing, or coaching. He spent many nights and hours in the car, driving to games or practices to support his nieces and nephews. Greg was the definition of loyal. He seldom missed a game, event, or moment in the lives of his nieces and nephews - no matter the sea-

son, no matter the distance. No event was too small, and he was very proud of his family. His kindness, humor, and steady presence will be remembered and deeply missed by all who knew him. Whether you needed a ride, a wrench, or a reality check, Greg was already there. Known widely for his uncanny ability to fix anything - or at the very least tell you a better way it could be done - he was the quiet problem-solver whose word you could trust. Beyond his

physical stature and capable hands, those who knew Greg will certainly remember his big heart first. He was caring and was known for his great sense of humor.

His mother, Erline McBurney Jesseman, predeceased him in 2023. Greg is survived by his father, Wendell Jesseman, his sister and brother-in-law, Karen and Tom White, and his brother and sister-in-law, Rick and Kelly Jesseman. He is also lovingly remembered by his six nephews and nieces - Tom White II and his wife Ellen, Heather Santos and her husband Eric, Michael White and his wife Jasmine, Jennifer Morneault and her husband Myles, Jared Jesseman, and Aiden Jesseman - as well as many great-nieces and great-nephews who brought him joy throughout his life.

A Celebration of Life will be held on Saturday, Nov. 1, 2025, at 1 p.m. at the Shared Ministry Church, 49 S Main St. in Lisbon, New Hampshire.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to the Lisbon Playground Fund, Lisbon Fire Department, or the Lisbon Fast Squad.

To view Gregory’s Online Tribute, send condolences to the family, or for more information, visit www.phaneuf.net.

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U.S. DISTRICT COURT

Littleton Man Forfeits Truck In Federal Drug Plea

BY ROBERT BLECHL
Staff Writer

A Littleton man avoided lengthy time behind bars, but had to forfeit his late-model pickup truck as part of a federal drug sentencing this week.

Aaron Loew, 46, was the last of the three local defendants to plead guilty in a Lawrence, Massachusetts-based drug trafficking operation, which transported fentanyl into the Granite State and netted, in October 2023, a total of 15 defendants, most of them from Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire.

From October 2021 through August 2023, the leader of the trafficking enterprise had used a social media messaging application and other means to coordinate narcotics transactions with customers in New Hampshire through "runners" in Massachusetts.

During the investigation, law enforcement seized more than one kilogram of fentanyl.

The investigation also involved a review of text messages over the social media account managed by the enterprise, and the messages showed a total of more than 14 kilograms of fentanyl negotiated with various large-scale drug dealers in New Hampshire, as well as a gun-for-drug trade, said prosecutors from the U.S. attorney's office in New Hampshire.

For his part in the trafficking, Loew pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to distribute and possess with intent to distribute controlled substances. The charge carried a maximum sentence of 20 years in federal prison.

In exchange, prosecutors dismissed a second count.

Judge Landya McCafferty sentenced Loew to time served, three years of supervised release, and a \$500 fine, payable in full no later than 90 days after his sentencing.

According to the criminal case judgment, Loew must for-

feit a 2021 Ford F-150 Tremor to the United States government.

A federal statute allows for the forfeiture of property obtained from the proceeds of criminal activity or used to commit it.

For time served, federal prosecutors, through a pre-sentencing report that Loew contested, had recommended an eight-year prison sentence.

"The recommended guideline sentence sufficiently captures the gravity of the offense of conviction and offense conduct, particularly the defendant's elevated culpability associated with recurring purchases of large drug amounts for distribution," assistant U.S. attorney Cesar Vega wrote in the government's sentencing memorandum. "The defendant is accountable for 5,860 grams of fentanyl, which he purchased over the course of 16 months."

Loew's "tendency to re-offend shows a total disregard for the law and complete indifference to the prospect of short-term incarceration," said Vega.

A sentence of eight years would adequately reflect the seriousness of the offense and promote respect for the law by recognizing the public harm caused by distributing large quantities of fentanyl, namely the increased risk of opioid-related overdose deaths, and it also protects the public from further drug crimes by Loew by appropriately removing him from the community for a significant time, said Vega.

The two other local defendants who pleaded guilty were Johnnie Boynton, 43, of Littleton, who was sentenced to three years in prison, and Benjamin Conkright, 30, of Whitefield, who was sentenced to several weeks of time served.

Local police departments assisting the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in the case were Littleton and Whitefield, as well as New Hampshire State Police.

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DO GOODERS

Boys & Girls Club Of North Country Expanding

New Childcare Center Under Construction

BY AMY ASH NIXON
Staff Writer

LISBON, N.H. — When people think of a traditional Boys & Girls Club, they may not consider the full role the nonprofit plays in today's North Country, which now includes an ambitious childcare center expansion project.

Ground broke for the center this fall, and completion is expected in 2026.

The local club has been serving the greater Littleton region for two decades, and meeting a need for daycare is a service to the community, officials with the club say.

"Twenty years ago, this group of community members came together and noticed that there was not really a safe, productive place for kids to be during their out-of-school time, and they came together and formed what is now known as the Boys and Girls Club of the North Country," said Erin Talcott, North Country Development Associate with the Boys & Girls Club of the North Country.

At the recent celebration to mark the 20th anniversary, some of the original members and the director at the inception, Mike Ferrant, were on hand to help recall the early days, said Talcott.

The idea from the early

days was to have a meeting space for kids to come together "and not just to be babysat, but a place where they could learn and grow and thrive and engage in programs that they might not otherwise have the opportunity to participate in," Talcott said.

A former teacher, Talcott said, "What's really special is seeing students who might find the school day challenging absolutely thriving here, whether that's through something like robotics or participating in our climbing program. ... they have the opportunity to shine during this part of their day."

Talcott said the club benefits from still having some of the original founders involved.

Merging in 2023 with the Boys & Girls Club of Central New Hampshire has been a benefit, she said.

"It allowed us to pull together resources...a full Human Resources team backing us, finance, development ... we're able to utilize expertise from across the state and with that, we're able to fully launch into early childhood now," Talcott said.

She called it a "massive undertaking," but one that is necessary.

"We're lacking quality childcare right now. There are huge waitlists everywhere in



The Boys & Girls Club of the North Country is expanding to add an early childhood program. (Courtesy Photo)

the area," Talcott said.

She credits the staff with helping making the club beneficial to the region.

"(They) receive a ton of training on how to be strong role models, on how to work with kids," she said. "They're proactively creating a positive culture within the club, checking in with families, making a great experience for kids ... they are a dream team, they make it happen every day!"

Talcott said she's not just saying that as a club official.

"My own child attends the club here and I get to see firsthand how talented the staff is and how deeply they care about kids and how they want kids to be successful," she said.

She said staff creating a space where children can safely gather while their parents attend to their jobs is "the workforce behind the work-

force."

The Boys & Girls Club of the North Country's mission is to provide a fun, safe, positive place for all children of the North Country, under the guidance of caring adults.

Over 100 children benefit from the club each year, Talcott said, but the real success is not in the numbers.

"For us, success is that every child wants to be here, where they feel accepted and welcomed and loved and can experience joy outside of school, outside of their home, and know that this is somewhere safe that they belong," said Talcott.

The club is located close to the Evergreen Sports Center where specialty programs like rock climbing and swimming lessons are available for children attending the Boys & Girls Club.

Also at the club, programs

that are designed to develop life skills and build self-esteem in students are offered including cooking classes, robotics, STEM programming and more.

The club also offers summer programs and school vacation camps, helping to fill the gap for working families during school breaks.

"I think a lot of people don't often think about the Boys & Girls Club being in the early childhood world," said Talcott, and families are struggling to find care.

She said the new childcare center is in direct response to a community need.

"We're going to be converting some of our office spaces into an early child care center with 56 slots total to just support the community," she said. "We are hoping by next summer we'll be opening ... there are lots of exciting things on the horizon."

One piece of progress that recently took place was establishing a licensed commercial kitchen.

"We're working on partnering with the New Hampshire Food Bank so we can actually serve dinners to our club members or send meals home with families," Talcott said.

Community members can benefit the club, she said, by spreading the word about its existence and benefits.

"People sometimes don't know that our building is behind Evergreen, so sharing about our work is a huge

help," she said.

There's also a financial need and a desire for volunteers and contributions of items for the center.

"If people feel compelled or passionate about helping the club, we are always thankful for donations so we can continue offering competitive wages to staff and keep our doors open as much as possible," Talcott said. "Or if you can give time or gently used or new toys, whatever is within someone's capacity."

She said community support is what has kept the club going for so long.

"We wouldn't be here today without the support of hundreds and hundreds of people," she said.

More About The Club

- The Boys & Girls Club of the North Country was founded in 2005 by Brenda Adams, Bob Butson, Duane Coute, Anita Craven, Bob Craven, Denny Engstrom, Sally Field Russell, Brenda Highland, Erlene Jessemann, Mike Kenney, Barbara Langworthy, Dick Langworthy, Kevin O'Brien, and Therese Reger.

- In 2024, the Club obtained licensure from the NH Child Care Licensing Bureau.

- The Club has received a \$1.9M ARPA Grant from GOFFER to build a child care center within the Clubhouse.

The Boys & Girls Club of the North Country's website is: <https://nhyouth.org/location/boys-girls-club-north-country>

Tram

Continued from Page 2

North Country, so many friends of the tram, community members, government officials, who came out to celebrate its legacy. It's bittersweet. But we're also very excited because while we're honoring the tram today, we're looking to the future and the next-generation tram, tram III."

A structural analysis of the tramway's existing infrastruc-

ture, its terminals and towers, is expected to be complete by the first or second week of December, he said.

On Cannon Mountain's summit for much of the day, greeting visitors and ensuring smooth operations was Jennifer Karnan, marketing director for Cannon Mountain and the state park.

Down below were food trucks and entertainment.

"I didn't hear a single complaint the entire day," said Kar-

nan. "I just saw a lot of happy people who were very excited to be here for this final goodbye to the tram. I think I speak for the whole staff when I say it's an honor to be here during this pivotal time, in this transition between the second-generation tram and incoming third-generation tram."

Cannon's unique history, she said, is deeply felt.

"It keeps coming back to me today just the fact that the first-generation tramway here

was the first of its kind, the first passenger tramway in North America," said Karnan.

At many other ski areas, skiers then were taking single-chair lifts to the top, she said.

"Just to have this tram come in at this particular location that's already special and already steeped in so much history, and to really enhance the ski community in way that hadn't happened elsewhere, because people were able to commune

here at the base and commune in the tram itself on the way up, I think adds a really special communal element," said Karnan.

Friendships have been struck as passengers met on the tram, she said.

"You might sit with one or two strangers on a chairlift, but there's nothing like being in a carful of folks who maybe haven't met, but all love the same thing," said Karnan. "It's really incredible."

Because the process is still ongoing, it's not yet certain if the third-generation cars will be called Ketchup and Mustard, but there are plenty of advocates for it, she said.

"It's been so great to close this beautiful chapter on 45 great years of the second-generation tram and we are very much looking forward to see this next project come to fruition and see the shape of things to come with the next-generation tram," said Karnan.



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Fundraiser Launched To Help Infant Battle Rare Heart Condition

Littleton, N.H., native Sarah Phi-Toro is asking for help as her infant daughter battles a rare and complex heart condition.

A GoFundMe organized by family friend Erica Buenrostro aims to support Phi-Toro, her husband Samuel, and their daughter Cora Faith, who has been receiving treatment at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston.

“Cora was born with a very rare syndrome called heterotaxy, which means she has no spleen and a variety of complex heart defects,” Phi-Toro wrote in a note shared on the fundraising page. “Her case is so unique that doctors call her ‘one of one.’”

Phi-Toro said the family learned something was wrong during their 20-week pregnancy scan and were referred to MUSC, more than three hours from their home, for specialized pediatric cardiac care.

Cora was born three weeks early by emergency cesarean section and spent eight days in the neonatal intensive care unit before being discharged. Since then, she has endured multiple surgeries, including a rare heart operation on June 22 and a G-tube placement on Aug. 12.

“After two long months in the hospital, we’re finally home again, helping Cora grow and get stronger before her next surgeries,” Phi-Toro wrote. “She will need two more open-heart surgeries to attempt a full repair and will require lifelong specialized care.”

Because of Cora’s condition, Phi-Toro said she is unable to work, and her husband has taken significant time away from his job to be with the family.

Buenrostro said she launched the fundraiser to help relieve the family’s financial strain from hospital stays, travel costs, and lost income.

“We are asking for your help—through donations, prayers, or simply sharing Cora’s story,” Phi-Toro wrote. “Every contribution goes directly to her medical care, travel expenses, and supporting our family as we continue this journey with our strong, beautiful girl.”

The GoFundMe campaign, titled Support for Baby Cora Faith’s Heart Journey, can be found at www.gofundme.com/f/cora-faiths-healthy-heart-journey.





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Residents Weigh In On Proposed LRH-Dartmouth Health Affiliation

BY ROBERT BLECHL
Staff Writer

LITTLETON — A proposed affiliation between Littleton Regional Healthcare and the Lebanon-based Dartmouth Health took another step forward after a community listening session on Wednesday.

Responding to questions from some of the several dozen area residents turning out, Bob Nutter, president and CEO of LRH, and Joanne Conroy, president and CEO of Dartmouth Health (DH), said job eliminations or layoffs at LRH are not part of the plan, LRH will retain its employees, name, mission, doctors, independence and board of trustees, and local donations to LRH will stay local.

“LRH’s money remains LRH’s money,” said Nutter.

The benefits of LRH becoming a member hospital of DH, they said, are greater efficiencies; greater purchasing power at less cost for equipment, insurance, and other expenses; cost controls and savings; a sharing of physicians; improved employee recruitment and

retention; continued investments in people, facility and technology; maintenance of current programs and services while accommodating growth to meet future needs; keeping care closer to home; better ability to navigate an ever-changing healthcare landscape; and making LRH — as a rural hospital facing the sometimes financial and other challenges of all rural hospitals — more sustainable for generations to come.

When asked about the negatives of an affiliation, Nutter and Ashley Garrison, chair of LRH’s board of trustees, said the only one that comes to mind is the fear of change.

“We’re trying to combat that with transparency,” said Nutter. “We’re really doing it in the best interest for all of us in this community, to meet our current needs and keep care closer to home.”

Fear can be generated when affiliations or mergers are announced because people might think something bad is occurring, said Garrison.

“Here, that’s not the case,” she said. “We are approaching this from a position of strength because

we know it’s the best thing we can do for our community going forward, because we want to make sure we’re going to be here for quite a long time and can give you all the care you need and then some ... This was the best way to ensure that all of you will be able to keep coming here for as long as you need to. Dartmouth was the best, and frankly, the only choice once we reviewed everything.”

In early 2023, four years after LRH withdrew from its affiliation with North Country Healthcare, the LRH board of trustees and administration began evaluating the benefits of partnering with a larger healthcare system.

In September, after a two-year study of different affiliation models, LRH’s board announced that a letter of intent had been signed with DH, its preferred partner, which includes Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, a cancer center, children’s health, a school of medicine, and nursing, rehabilitation, hospice, and personal healthcare services.

Currently, DH has nine community hospitals and 30 clinics in New Hampshire and Vermont as

members.

“Dartmouth Health, they understand rural healthcare, and that’s a big difference,” said Nutter.

“We are the most rural academic medical center in the country,” said Conroy. “The next most rural is the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota ... I would say that makes us uniquely sensitive to what’s going on with our members.”

Following Wednesday’s community session, the next step for LRH and DH is to complete their integration agreement with its terms, possibly in December or January, and send it to the New Hampshire Attorney General’s Charitable Trust Unit, which, per statute, is required to undertake a regulatory review of all proposed healthcare affiliations before rendering any approval.

Under the working timeline, an approval could come in mid-2026.

Post-integration opportunities and benefits include enhancements to clinical services, behavioral health and substance abuse treatment, emergency department and hospitalist coordination, maternity and child healthcare, laboratory,

radiology, and pharmacy, and common electronic health records, said Nutter.

Since 2010, 148 independent rural hospitals across the nation have closed as they faced challenges ranging from recruitment and retention to investments and weathering difficulties such as the pandemic and nursing and staffing shortages, he said.

In New Hampshire, major shifts in healthcare over the last few decades have led more hospitals to form or join systems, said Nutter.

DH is New Hampshire’s largest private employer, the state’s only academic health system, a Level I trauma center, and a children’s hospital, and has consistently been ranked New Hampshire’s number one hospital by U.S. News and World Report.

To the Littleton community, DH can bring more convenient and cost-effective options, improved coordination of care, more career opportunities for LRH employees, and the resources of an academic health system, said Conroy, who, in addition to her role at DH, is the immediate past chair of the American Hospital Association.

LRH looked at other facilities to affiliate with, but several wanted to take over completely, take LRH’s money, make decisions for LRH, eliminate its board of directors, and rule from wherever they are, said Jeff Woodward, a member of LRH’s board of trustees.

“With Dartmouth, we know they can add members to our board, but our board will stay intact,” he said. “They can add two or three members to our board. We set our own budgets in the future. We get them approved by Dartmouth, but our board and our senior leadership still set the budgets for the future, and they will approve them through the Dartmouth facility.”

DH would approve major capital projects, and LRH capital plans, like now, will include a business plan and be shown to DH to demonstrate that LRH can afford them, said Woodward.

“Other than that, I don’t feel there’s a major difference,” he said. “This facility operates under our executive team and our board of directors.”

“It is not a takeover,” said Conroy. “It is a member organization.”

About six weeks ago, officials from LRH and DH met with LRH employees, to a positive reception, said Conroy.

Tim Egan, a former state representative from Sugar Hill and an occasional patient of both hospitals,

said New Hampshire and Vermont are aging states at a time when the nation is seeing reductions in federal resources like Medicare and Medicaid.

He asked how a DH-LRH partnership would reduce costs and ensure that patients receive their fair share of resources.

Currently, New Hampshire, which has 12 percent of its citizens enrolled in Medicaid, and Vermont, which has 35 percent, are figuring out how they will address the consequences of HR 1, said Conroy.

HR 1, passed by the U.S. Congress in July, includes nearly \$1 trillion in Medicaid cuts over the next 10 years while also providing \$50 billion to offset some impacts on rural hospitals.

“What we are trying to focus on, writ large, is costs,” said Conroy. “It doesn’t matter if you’re on Medicare or Medicaid or commercial. It’s how do we deliver care that is lower cost. It’s who doesn’t need to be in the hospital and how can we deliver care at home ... Especially as people age, the hospital is the last place they want to be. We are working with our department of medicine and department of geriatrics to try to refine models of care at home ... That is how we are going to decrease costs, using the hospital only for the very sick patients that actually need to be there.”

Medication costs and tests are also part of the savings discussion, she said.

So is shared purchasing in bulk, said Nutter.

“It’s not just reducing costs, it’s reducing the acceleration of costs, and some of these costs are just out of control,” he said. “There’s a lot of stuff going on at the national level ... These are the things I think Dartmouth Health can help us with.”

Prior to the proposed affiliation, LRH and DH have had a history of partnering, including in the areas of cardiology, dermatology, sleep medicine, oncology, and telemedicine programs.

“Is there anything in the agreement that says if the board of Littleton Regional Hospital decides this arrangement isn’t working out that we’re going to go back to being an independent?” asked Brad Bailey, a former state representative and Littleton-based State Farm insurance agent from Monroe.

“The agreement hasn’t been finished yet, but there’s nothing in that agreement that would have that specific information,” said Nutter.

“That’s probably why we do a lot of due diligence,” said Conroy.

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Concerns Arise As Medicare Advantage Shrinks

BY ROBERT BLECHL
Staff Writer

LITTLETON — Medicare Advantage, the alternative to traditional Medicare that offers bundled packages by private insurers, is collapsing in the North Country and New Hampshire as providers pull out or scale back, leaving local seniors who rely on it with fewer options.

Across the Granite State, nearly 80,000 Granite Staters use the Advantage programs.

The topic went to discussion at a community listening session at Littleton Regional Healthcare on Wednesday, during a question-and-answer session following a presentation about the proposed affiliation between LRH and Dartmouth Health (DH).

A question was asked about whether Humana will be the only provider to remain in northern New Hampshire beginning in 2026, and whether LRH will be the only site north of the Notch.

Representatives of DH are scheduled to meet with Humana representatives in early December, following some confusion.

"Humana called us and said they're excluding us from their network," said Joanne Conroy, DH CEO and president. "We did not opt out of the network."

Then, a month ago, Steve LeBlanc, DH's chief strategy officer, received a call from Humana asking why DH is not in Humana's network. Humana representatives were told it was Humana that had excluded DH, she said.

"They said we need to have another conversation about including you," said Conroy.

Unfortunately, that meeting will not occur until December, she said.

The last day to enroll in Medicare Advantage is Dec. 7.

"These are a little bit of the vagaries of health insurance across the country," said Conroy. "Essentially, we try to accommodate everybody in our communities in terms of the insurance products they have. I have to say Medicare Advantage is leaving New Hampshire and Vermont, it seems, en masse. There's only a few providers that are staying in the state ... We have got to educate and work with people to help them transition to traditional Medicare if their Medicare Advantage product is discontinued. It's going to be challenging for a lot people to understand."

There are many questions about what's occurring with Medicare Advantage products, at least in the Northeast, she said.

In the Littleton area, State Farm insurance agent Brad Bailey manages Medicare supplements and the Humana product for his clients.

He noted the tight deadline of early December for people to sign up and the meeting between Humana and DH occurring around the same time.

"I have tons of people who have to make decisions," said Bailey. "This is really difficult because people have to make changes now for Jan. 1, and one of the biggest reasons why people aren't purchasing any Advantage plan is because Humana is only offering one plan. It's the only company in Grafton and Coos and there are no Advantage plans in Carroll County next year. So it's really disheartening for people who can't afford that supplement. And when people find out in particular that Dartmouth isn't part of this Humana program, it's really disheartening."

That doesn't mean LRH can't accept Medicare

Advantage plans, but it can get tricky if a patient has to be transferred to a DH clinic or the medical center, said Conroy.

Humana representatives also gave Bailey a different story than the one they told DH.

"Probably the reason why they gave you different story is it's a different leadership team in Humana now," said LeBlanc.

The former leadership had made the decision to exclude DH, he said.

"So when they came to meet with us, they hadn't realized they'd canceled our contract," said LeBlanc. "So we're trying to get back with them. But with all the insurance relationships, they're really done at the individual hospital level. So you're absolutely right, the issue becomes if there are transfers of care from one place to another. That's the challenge. But we have never canceled a Medicare Advantage contract at the Dartmouth level. It's all been folks that are dropping out of the network and not offering the plan."

DH can call Humana again to see if the December meeting date can be moved up, he said.

Conroy and Bob Nutter, LRH's CEO and president, said LRH will accept the Humana Medicare Advantage plan in 2026.

"That will take care of all of this, but, as Doctor Conroy said, if you start here and for some reason have to go to a higher level of care down at Dartmouth, you're going to run into a problem with the insurance," said Nutter. "We want to help cure that, but we need to have an insurance partner who understands, too. Pressure from the public is helpful, too, to be honest with you."

Medicare Advantage, which is regulated by the federal government, bundles hospital, medical, and prescription drugs into one plan. It can offer additional benefits such as vision, dental, and hearing that are not included in traditional Medicare. Advantage caps out-of-pocket expenses for services covered, but can carry higher costs in other areas, including for out-of-network providers.

New Hampshire has had six Medicare Advantage providers.

According to the New Hampshire Insurance Department (NHID), Martin's Point will fully withdraw from the state, and Anthem is exiting the individual market.

Aetna will exit most counties, including Grafton. UnitedHealthcare will exit Coos County.

The reasons for provider withdrawals include reduced federal payment rates to insurers and additional federal regulatory and compliance requirements.

Before the New Hampshire House of Representatives' Commerce and Consumer Affairs Committee on Sept. 10, NHID Commissioner A. J. Bettencourt said, "From what I am observing, the Medicare Advantage market as it exists today is collapsing. There will be fewer players in that market, there will be fewer offerings."

In a press release issued by the department on Oct. 1, Bettencourt said, "While these withdrawals and reductions will create challenges and uncertainty for many Granite Staters, New Hampshire's market will continue to offer meaningful plan options and strong consumer protections. Thanks to a new law signed by Governor Ayotte this year, NHID has greater insight into carrier decisions. We are here to ensure consumers receive timely, accurate information and assistance during this period of transition, and I urge those impacted to reach out if they have questions."

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