

LOCALNEWS

More info on hospital integration expected

County board urges transparency on decision to end negotiations

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

More information about the details of proposals exchanged between the Rainy Lake Medical Center Board and Essentia Health is expected to be released to the public once an “unwind” of the affiliation of the local hospital is completed.

That unwind of agreements between the two parties must be completed by June 30, but representatives of both sides have said they will attempt to unwind by the end of this year.

Bob Haley, RLMC interim CEO, and members of the RLMC Board, representing the former Falls Memorial Hospital trustees, met Tuesday with the Koochiching County Board to discuss the status of the hospital.

In August, the board and Essentia officials announced that an effort to fully integrate the hospital in International Falls with Essentia Health had ended. Since then, hospital board members have said the hospital will move forward independently.

Commissioners said they were disappointed an Essentia representative did not attend. While no one was invited, they said Essentia was notified the issue would be discussed at the meeting.

Haley and some board members said they could not yet release some information that led to the end of integration negotiations because of a confidentiality agreement that prohibits board members from discussing certain aspects of

the issue. However, he said, the board has instructed him to conduct public forums upon completion of the unwind. In addition, he said a guest column by a board member was published in Wednesday’s edition of The Journal, and today’s edition would carry an advertisement about the issue.

County commissioners urged the board to provide information to the community as soon as possible to end concerns about the future of the hospital. They said the lack of transparency in the negotiations have caused concern in the community.

Haley said the local hospital is viable as an independent hospital and has more options than when it was affiliated with Essentia.

“I think people will be pleased with the plans for an independent hospital,” Haley said. “The vision and the future is brighter now than it has been for the last two years.”

Haley said the hospital has a positive cash flow now, but not as much as prior to affiliation with Essentia. He said money is being put in the bank each year and the hospital has no debt.

With the end of affiliation and negotiations toward integration, he said the board has the opportunity to bring specialists from other places to the hospital and to recruit physicians from more than just one source.

And he said the board is committed to providing obstetric services because members feel that

women anticipating labor of a child should not have to drive 100 more miles to give birth.

He also told the board that he has had discussions about sharing services with an official from a medical provider in Fort Frances. Federal designation as a physician shortage area “may open things up,” he said.

After the unwind is completed, Haley said the 14-member RLMC Board will be dissolved and the remaining seven who represent the former FMH board of trustees will be in place. He said board members are now considering bylaws.

Board member Bonnie Erickson, who represents the former FMH trustees, said she and other FMH members are hearing positive remarks from the public about ending the integration talks.

“We are hearing that people are pleased we are going to be independent,” she said, “that we have courage and they are confident in what we are doing.”

Erickson said everyone on the board was excited about integration and was willing to take on the financial loss of the clinic, and in turn, use Essentia-provided specialty services. But she said the specialty services did not come as anticipated.

“We really wanted this to work,” she said, adding at one point that she would resign from the board if she had breached the confidentiality agreement.

She also said the board never said people could not use Essentia physicians or

be transferred to another Essentia hospital. She said all the physicians working in the community are excellent, “there just aren’t enough of them.”

She said the board asked Essentia to return oncology services to the community, lack of which represented a \$450,000 loss to the community. But that did not happen.

Brian Briggs, the newest board member, said other small, rural independent hospitals in the region are doing well. He pointed at Bigfork and Bemidji as examples.

Board member Bob Anderson listed other independent hospitals — Ely, Cook, Moose Lake, Cloquet — which he said are doing well.

Haley also said that the board is discussing how it can work with the Littlefork Medical Center. “There may be a lot of things we can do together, if we don’t focus on Duluth,” he said.

But Commissioner Wade Pavleck said the Bigfork health care provider is under public scrutiny because it operates in the open.

Haley said it is likely that the future will bring more transparency to the hospital’s operations. Had the integration been completed, he said no board would have been in International Falls, and instead would have been operating in Duluth.

Erickson also said that operating as a nonprofit calls for closed meetings. However, she said the finances of the hospital are available from the Minnesota Hospital Association.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Mark Gierszewski congratulates an obviously pleased and surprised Donna Ysen on her new furnace.

A timely gift

When Shannon’s Inc. announced in August it would take part in a furnace giveaway, Mark Gierszewski said he wanted to see the smile on someone’s face when they are presented with a free furnace.

Gierszewski, Shannon’s safety manager, got the chance to see that smile on Donna Ysen’s face a week ago today when the company delivered and installed the furnace at the home Ysen shares with husband Les.

Lennox teamed with Minnesota dealers in the Heat Up Minnesota

program to provide 100 free furnaces to families in need throughout Minnesota. Lennox provided the furnace, and Shannon’s employees supplied materials and labor, all free of charge.

“We’re not making anything on this, this is all about helping our community and giving back,” Gierszewski said in August.

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The Ysens were nominated to receive the furnace.

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This is Ken Lupelow and Bernice Lamb

Ken has been diagnosed with Malignant Non-Small Cell Carcinoma

Ken has had a long, hard road with the treatment and travel he and his family have already endured. Ken recently underwent a second operation and again pulled through! A second round of chemotherapy and radiation will begin on October 22, 2013 in an attempt to treat his cancer. Their long and difficult journey continues and we attempt to continue to provide support for medical and travel expenses. Please join us for a Benefit for Ken and Bernie on October 17, 2013 at the Dairy Queen. Dairy Queen has agreed to donate a percentage of the daily sales to Ken and Bernice to help with medical and travel expenses. All donations are greatly appreciated.

Thank you in advance,
Friends and Family of Ken Lupelow and Bernice Lamb

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