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- Special to the Daily Leader

EDITOR'S NOTE: Southwest Medical Center President and CEO Norm Lambert has issued this press release on why the hospital is seeking approval for General Obligation Bonds in order to expand the hospital's facilities during the March 2 special election.

On March 2, voters of Seward County will go to the polls to decide if the county-owned Southwest Medical Center can issue general obligation bonds in the amount of \$17 million to expand and renovate the 45-year-old health care facility in Liberal.

General obligation bonds provide the lowest cost of financing for a public purpose project. Financial consultants estimate that GO bonds can be sold at rates approximately .5 percent below the level of revenue bonds, resulting in significant interest savings. The bonds will be repaid by a gross revenues pledge of the medical center and not from property taxes.

SWMC has been paying the principal and interest on similar general obligation bonds issued by the county in the early 1990s. The estimated payments on this financing are nearly identical to the payments on the Series 1991 bonds.

The medical center is uniquely successful compared to other rural hospitals. State sources

indicate that it is one of only three such publicly-owned health care providers in the entire state of Kansas that does not receive tax assistance for maintenance operations.

SWMC is a valuable part of both the quality of life as well as the economy of Liberal and Seward County. In addition to providing round-the-clock medical care and emergency services, the medical center is one of the area's largest employers.

In 2009, it employed 450 total employees with a payroll of approximately \$16.9 million. Economists estimate that such payroll dollars are recirculated in a community by seven to eight times – making the economic impact an estimated \$130 million to the community.

An additional community benefit is in the fact that the hospital provides charitable services and wrote off bad debts in 2009 in the amount of more than \$7.3 million, providing care and benefits to those with limited resources and in need.

Health care is both important and big business at SWMC. In 2009, more than 56,000 patients were provided medical services at the facility. That number equates to approximately 154 patients served on an average day.

The emergency room had more than 12,000 visitors in 2009.

SWMC physicians performed more than 3,900 surgical procedures in the same time period.

Much joy came to so many families in 2009 when 858 babies were born at SWMC.

Why does the medical center need to expand? The answer is growth in health care services and constantly changing regulations.

Growth is evident in the fact that in 2009, more than 40,000 outpatients were served at the medical center. That compares to approximately 27,000 in 2004 – an increase of more than 13,000 visits or 41 percent in just a five-year period.

SWMC is also truly a regional health care facility. In addition to serving the residents of Seward County, patients from other parts of Southwest Kansas as well as Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas visit the medical center. And more often than not, visitors from outside Seward County spend dollars when visiting the medical center, contributing to the local economy.

The bond issue is scheduled for Tuesday, March 2. Voter registration books for this election will close on Monday, Feb. 15.

The medical center is planning on development of informational brochures for distribution to the public explaining the challenge, the project and the financing. Public informational meetings prior to the election are also being planned to share information and answer questions.

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