

- Special to the Daily Leader

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a series of stories exploring the upcoming election on the bond proposal for Southwest Medical Center upgrades.

A special election has been scheduled for March 2 for voters to decide the next step in medical care in Seward County.



In 1964, the community opted to build Southwest Medical Center to replace the aging Epworth Hospital and to meet the growing medical needs at that time.

Liberal had grown from 13,813 to 16,573 from 1964 to 1991, and the one-story hospital needed to expand to meet the growing needs of the community.

The tower that was added focused on in-patient care with more rooms, intensive care, and enhancements to the emergency room.

Since then, medical advancements have allowed for many of the services offered by hospitals to be done on an out-patient basis. For Southwest Medical Center, 72 percent of the services they provide today are done as out-patient visits.

But the facility was designed for in-patient care.

The proposed improvements are designed to update the facility to meet the new delivery methods of health care and to keep pace with the growing population. Liberal is estimated to be more than 20,000 and growing.

The proposal includes infrastructure upgrades, renovations to the first and second floors, fixtures and equipment.

The hospital is still operating with the original 1964 boiler and other equipment from the construction 46 years ago. Enhancements will make the facility more efficient and cost-effective. And, with a new MRI and other equipment as part of the proposal, the hospital will be able to meet the needs of a 21st century society.

“You think computers get antiquated quick, technology in the medical field goes by at such a quick pace, equipment from four or five years ago is no longer state of the art,” Liberal Public Works Director Joe Sealey said. “It is important for the well-being of the community to stay abreast of the latest technology in the medical profession. It benefits everybody. For baby boomers, it will be extremely important for us.”

In the end, Southwest Medical Center will have the tools necessary to attract needed doctors to meet the growing demands for patients, retain current physicians by having the equipment needed to provide care, be able to extend Medicare to those denied access due to current patient loads, and help retain more patients that are seeking services elsewhere.

An addition that will be part of the project but not funded by the bond will be a Medical Office Building. The MOB will help recruit doctors, make patient care more convenient by being attached to the hospital, and increase access for those using Medicare. The MOB cannot be a part of the bond since private doctors will be using the facility, but according to SWMC CEO Norm Lambert, the funds and resources are in place to build the MOB without bond funds.

The remaining upgrades will be placed on a \$17 million bond with the payments to be made by Southwest Medical Center. There is no tax increase associated with the bond. This is the same method that was used to fund the tower upgrade in 1991 and all previous upgrades to Southwest Medical Center.

No tax money has been used to fund any operating or expansion costs of the hospital, according to Seward County Clerk Stacia Long.

“Since I’ve been here, they have never levied a tax for the hospital,” she said.

That means those who use the facility will pay for the facility. According to Lambert, 35 percent of the patients who utilize Southwest Medical Center come from outside Seward County. By using this funding method, those patients will help fund the expansion.

The bond payments will be similar to the current payment that the hospital already makes, so there should be no increase in costs to patients for the new bond.

Long said her office will accept voter registrations for the upcoming bond issue until Feb. 15, the same day advance voting begins at the Seward County Administration Building. The election will take place at the Seward County Activity Center March 2.