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By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the third in a series of articles concerning the joint meeting Thursday between the Seward County Commission and the Southwest Medical Center Board of Trustees. This story looks at feedback from Thursday's audience. A final article will address remarks from members of the commission and the board of trustees.

After administrators and trustees made the decision to close the psychiatric unit at Southwest Medical Center recently, medical professionals in the community questioned why, particularly when a medical office building was proposed to be built using hospital money.

Many at Thursday's meeting of the Seward County Commission and SWMC Board of Trustees said the building was not part of an expansion package voted on in March, but hospital CEO Norm Lambert said the facility has been part of the plan all along.

"When we made all the presentations with all the literature, the stories came out in the paper, we told the story that we were going to build the office building and how we were going to pay for it," he said. "I don't think we in any way tried to fool anybody in what we were trying to do, but going forward with these action plans we put in place, we should be in sound financial condition. We should be able to grow our business by attracting MRI patients, hopefully, surgery patients, doctors to the community."

Lambert said the trustees have seen the information and recently revisited the question of whether to close the psych unit. That resulted in a 4-3 vote of that board to do so.

Board of trustees chairman Joe Sealey said despite how things look now, he believes improvement is in the near future.

"At the moment, it looks ugly, but it's not going to stay ugly," he said.

Lambert received a question from Thursday's audience about who's decision it was to close the psych unit. He said that was not a decision of the public, but rather of the hospital's administration and board.

He next addressed the issue of whether the office building was part of the expansion package. He did say the \$17 million bond was for services other than the office building, but that facility had been a part of multiple presentations prior to the March vote.

"It was never hidden from anybody. That is actually the hospital's money and their authority to make that decision how to spend it, too," he said.

Lambert was asked by one audience member where the patients who currently use the psych unit will go for care, and a question was asked to how many times Lambert, hospital board members and county commissioners had visited the unit and how a vote could be made to eliminate the unit.

“All I can do is reiterate that it was a very difficult decision,” he said. “It’s going to be an emotional decision either way. I’ve been on the unit. I don’t go there every day, but I’ve been on the unit. I’ve worked in other areas in other hospitals that have had psychiatric programs, and I understand the emotion behind the care for that patient whether it’s you as a physician caring for a patient or a family member having to work for that.”

Lambert said the decision to close the psych unit was not taken lightly, and there was a choice in the matter.

“That unit has lost money probably forever,” he said. “The other services have provided for it. A study we had done two years ago showed it was losing over \$300,000 then.”

Lambert said, for the most part, money from other services provided at SWMC has made up the difference from that loss.

“We don’t have that, so now, we’re faced with that difficult decision of what to cut out and what not to cut out,” he said. “We’d love to provide it all.”

Liberal resident Brad Atkinson said while he understood the difficult decision to close the psych unit, he believes doing so would be devastating to many people and families in the community.

“It’d just be a travesty for this community, for the whole Southwest Kansas area,” he said. “I understand the unit costs a lot of money. It’s probably always lost money and may always will lose money. I understand that. Ambulance services, EMTs, always lose money. The ER will always lose money. But nobody here would ever vote to cut those services because they’re needed by the community.”

Atkinson emphasized cutting the psych unit would not be a help to the community.

“It will do nothing but hurt,” he said. “I’m all about low taxes and efficient government. Maybe it’s time for this facility to have some help from the local government, from the city or from the county. I know it hasn’t been that way for a long time. Maybe it could happen on a temporary basis. All I ask is that the trustees and the commissioners look at every possible option, look at every possible angle to keep the psych unit open.”

Doctors at SWMC recently voted 18-0 to eliminate the medical office building from the expansion project, and Dr. Anthony Canfield said Thursday it was not part of what citizens asked for.

“That was something that Mr. Lambert brought and, basically, put it with the rest of the construction,” he said. “None of us feel like that’s an absolute necessity. We try to make our expenses match our income.”

Canfield said the problem he and other doctors see is that a unit is being cut at the hospital while building is happening, something he said does not sit right with SWMC employees.

“Sure the timing sucks and the economy’s just starting to hit us, but I really hate to see the hospital lay off nurses because that is the lifeblood of what makes me be able to function as a doctor, and to see the machinery of the hospital being torn apart while we’re trying to build up the way the building looks and not how it functions,” he said.

Canfield said he would like to see the hospital function, and he believes this needs to be the focus of attention.

“Norm’s done a great job of planning this out and doing all the construction costs, but I think a lot of it has been at the expense of running a hospital,” he said.

Canfield said if a hospital functions more efficiently, doctors are better able to take care of their patients.

“We don’t need a big fancy office building for that,” he said. “We’d be glad to do it with or without. We can work in it if we need to, but we’re \$1.6 million down the road and we didn’t ask for that. We didn’t spend that as a medical staff. The renovation of the hospital is needed. The office building is a want.”

Liberal City Commissioner Dave Harrison, a former trustee, defended the decision to construct the medical office building, saying in the March election, the community voted for it.

“I don’t know where all you folks were, but we had meetings after meetings after meetings,” he said. “I don’t recall seeing any of you there. It was publicized everywhere. There’s been some changes since it passed. Maybe everybody had a crystal ball. I didn’t have those.”

Harrison asked questions about whether he would have voted to support the expansion project if he had known the psych unit was going to be shut down. He said he was unsure of whether he would do so.

“Nobody knows what’s going to happen two days from now,” he said. “There are no guarantees. There’s nothing. These guys have done their best to do a good job. We put our faith in this commission and this board to do what’s right, and for 18 or 20 people to overturn what the whole community supported just doesn’t seem right.”

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