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By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the last 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 addresses remarks from members of the commission and the board of trustees. After

hearing from Southwest Medical Center CEO Norm Lambert and members of Thursday's audience, county commissioners and hospital trustees had their chance to voice what they felt about the recent closing of the psychiatric unit and the proposed building of a medical office facility. C

Commissioner Jim Rice began the remarks by talking about visits he had with constituents regarding the necessity of having a medical office building. Rice said the best thing to do is to rely on the decision made by the trustees to move forward with the project.

"I would certainly think that building would house those new physicians that are coming," he said. "Maybe some of them are already here. I would think that would be an enticement to get new physicians to come to this community. This is an investment by the hospital board and this commission, this community – a cash investment, not a long-term bond issue like the \$17 million we are going to be paying interest on."

Instead, Rice said the medical office building will be bought and paid for with cash.

"It might cost a little money till it becomes occupied," he said. "Maybe nobody will move into it. At that time, we'll all know it was a big mistake. I have toiled with that whether it was right or whether it was wrong. We have \$1.6 million that's already invested in it, and I think a great deal of that had to do with the necessary ground work to build that new facility."

Rice said he is quite concerned about the future of health care in Seward County, particularly if nothing is done.

"In 20 years, where are we going to be?" he asked. "I know it's tough to look down the road 20 years. Those are some things that are unforeseen, and I rely a great deal on this board as I do any board, whether it's the fair board or the health department."

Rice said the the individuals on those boards are selected by the commission, and they are doing their best to do what's right.

"I don't think they're out to pull the wool over anybody's eyes," he said. "They're probably more concerned than everyone sitting in this room as to the future of what happens. They've given their best judgement, and they think it is a viable thing and will work."

Rice said it is not an easy to decide what is best for the future.

"I think we all need to look down the road 20, 30 years and just remember where we could be if we hadn't done that first remodel back in the 80s," he said. "They're difficult decisions, but I

guess we'll all live through them. We'll survive. The board has made their recommendation, and I would have to rely on their best judgement and go from there."

Commissioner C.J. Wettstein said there is a tough economical situation in place right now, but after looking at numbers from the firm handling the hospital's bond, he felt he had made up his mind what needed to be done – to go ahead with the project.

"Everybody's idea is we have good hospital care, good services for the people of Seward County," he said. "We even serve people in Beaver County, Texas County, the surrounding counties. We serve all these people, and I think everybody's goal is to have as good a hospital care as we possibly can. I feel we have excellent people working at the hospital. We have fantastic nurses. I think we have good doctors. The hospital people, their number one goal, I think, is to provide that service."

Wettstein said no one knows what will happen in the future.

"We don't know what the economy is going to do, and I hope it doesn't stay down forever," he said. "If it does go down forever, we're probably in trouble if we don't do everything. I understand what the doctors are saying, and it would be a fantastic thing if things turn around."

Wettstein said similar situations have occurred in the past with SWMC's history, and they have always turned around.

"If we bring the psych unit back up, that'd be great, but we have to make decisions that are tough decisions," he said. "They did not vote on the \$5 million office project, but it was brought in. The people did vote on the project."

Wettstein said the hospital board has looked at the issue from every angle possible.

"I think they've talked about it," he said. "I think they've looked at everything. I feel we just need to go ahead and follow their recommendation and go ahead and do the project. We may find out later on it's a bad decision. A lot of bad decisions are made. Sometimes you make a decision with the best of interest, and it does turn out bad."

Wettstein said he, like others, hopes this will not be a bad decision.

"It's nice that we have the reserves," he said. "I just think it's something we need to look at to really help and improve services for Seward County."

Trustee Gary Andrews said cutting the psych unit was something the hospital board agreed on, but he felt more effort needs to be made to see if something can be done to keep it open.

"It's part of care. I think it's important we all think about that," he said. "Norm has done things to see what we can to keep it. I think we need to try to look even deeper. I don't know if it is getting support from the city, getting support from the county. I think it's part of good care for our community, and by letting that go, it's letting go good care. I'd like to at least try to look at

maybe doing something with that and moving forward if we can.”

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