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Pinedale Roundup

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One Dollar

Hospital District chooses Star Valley

By Robert Galbreath
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MARBLETON – The Sublette County Hospital District Board of Trustees voted, 3-2, to begin contract negotiations with Star Valley Health as management partner at a special meeting on March 29.

The board opened the meeting with an executive session to discuss confidential feedback from Sublette County Rural Health Care District (SCRHCD) and Sublette Center employees. Following a two-hour executive session, the board reconvened and opened the floor to public comments before each trustee issued a statement.

Trustee Dr. Brendan Fitzsimmons made a motion to restart the search process and widen the pool to attract more candidates. The motion died due to lack of a second.

Board Vice Chairman Jamison Ziegler then moved to select Star Valley Health as a management partner with the hospital district contingent on negotiation and final approval of an acceptable contract between the parties. Fitzsimmons seconded the motion.

Ziegler, Fitzsimmons and board secretary/treasurer Kendra Tanner voted in favor while Chairwoman Tonia Hoffman and trustee Wendy Boman voted against the motion.

Hit reset

Fitzsimmons argued that the search process was defective and plagued by problems from the beginning.

“The road to this decision sure feels like it’s been hell,” Fitzsimmons added. “That’s because we’re going through (the search process) blindly. So much has been invisible to me.”

The choice between Star Valley Health and

See ‘STAR VALLEY’ on page **A16**

Dr. Fitzsimmons resigns from Hospital District board

By Robert Galbreath
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PINEDALE – Sublette County Hospital District trustee Dr. Brendan Fitzsimmons announced his resignation from the board at the end of its special meeting to select a management partner on March 29.

Fitzsimmons voted in favor of a motion to form a management partnership with Star Valley Health following a motion that he made to restart the search process.

Fitzsimmons stated that his decision was due to his role as an employee of the Sublette County Rural Health Care District and the Sublette County Hospital District when the former entity transfers its assets to the hospital district at the end of the fiscal year in July.

“I ran (for the hospital district board) because there was a time when we didn’t have enough people to fill the ballot, and that kind of worried me,” he said. “This vote tonight



BRADY OLTMANS PHOTO

Pinedale Elementary students raise their hands in hopes of asking Sen. John Barrasso a question during the senator’s visit on March 29.

Sen. Barrasso speaks at Pinedale Elementary

By Brady Oltmans
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PINEDALE – Assistant principal Janel Scurlock kept the teeming students busy with a few jokes while Pinedale Elementary School Principal Greg Legerski welcomed Sen. John Barrasso into the building. Legerski then took the microphone to introduce Barrasso.

As Barrasso explained it, Scurlock and Legerski were two of the local ties that connected the senator with the group of second- through fifth-graders gathered in front of him in the elementary school gym on March 29.

Barrasso explained to the students that he was on a conference call a few weeks earlier with educators from across Wyoming. Scurlock was also on that call. As Barrasso explained it, the conversation steered towards the brightest students in the state.

Scurlock told him he needed to visit Pinedale Elementary to see the finest students in Wyoming.

Later on, while answering a question about how he became senator, Barrasso said he received good help from the Legerski family. Some of the students were awed at that news.

The other main connection Barrasso had to the students came from a former page – Pinedale graduate Brooke Hornberger. She interned in Barrasso’s office last summer and told the senator to get to Pinedale, he explained.

Out of the gates, the first question he was asked concerned his age. He assured the student he was probably the oldest in the room. That gave him an opportunity to quiz the students on Wyoming’s age and briefly highlight the time George W. Bush came to Wyoming for the state’s centennial.

Barrasso also asked the students if they

had been to Mount Rushmore or could name the four faces on it. Only when they could name all four did the senator explain Theodore Roosevelt’s relationship with Wyoming. About how President Roosevelt gave a graduation speech at the University of Wyoming and said, “You’ve got here a great education, but more important than the education is the character of the people.”

That’s why Barrasso wanted to be in Pinedale, he said.

For the following nearly 35 minutes Barrasso answered various questions ranging from how long he’d been a senator (13 years) to if he’s famous (depends who you ask, he said) to what Wyoming has done to combat COVID-19 (it’s one of the leadings states in vaccinations) to how he voted for president in November (he voted for former President Donald Trump).

He talked about how he and President

See ‘BARRASSO’ on page **A3**

Yost picked for worldwide exhibit

PINEDALE – Pinedale’s own Gretchen Yost will be featured in Documentary Family Photographers Worldwide’s inaugural exhibit, Transforming Perspectives.

The exhibit will feature documentary family photographers from around the world starting on Monday, April 5.

Yost is one of 44 photographers from 11 different countries to be featured in the exhibit. Selections were made by juror Tiffanie Graham, a New York Times photo editor.



GRETCHEN YOST PHOTO

This taken by Pinedale’s Gretchen Yost will be featured in a worldwide exhibit of documentary family photographs.



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Official newspaper of Sublette County and the town of Pinedale.

STAR VALLEY

Continued from 1A

EIRMC/HCA was too limited, Fitzsimmons said. He found St. John's withdrawal in early March unnerving.

"I don't know what's going on there, and it concerns me," he said. "Losing St. John's the way we did, I really believe there are hard feelings on their part."

Tami Crosson echoed Fitzsimmons's sentiments that Citizen members of the public favored St. John's as the best option, and added that their withdrawal raised red flags.

William Wagon, St. John's CEO, cited the ongoing Sage Living project and the toll COVID-19 took on staff and resources as reasons behind St. John's withdrawal in a March 10 letter to the hospital board.

Senior center manager Joan Mitchell encouraged the community to look beyond St. John's withdrawal and said she fully trusted the board to make the right decision on the remaining candidates. Mitchell praised the time and effort the board put into the process.

Dave Doorn, administrative director at the SCRHCD, stated that, from a personal viewpoint, the board's process in interviewing candidates was fair and transparent.

No need to rush in

Fitzsimmons said he felt the board was acting too quickly to choose a partner because of conflicting interpretations over the loan process with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He felt the hospital board was operating under a belief that a management partner must be in place before submitting the application.

Lorraine Werner, the USDA's state rural community programs director, issued a letter outlining the application process to the SCRHCD and hospital district boards. She met with members of the joint planning committee, representing the SCRHCD, hospital board and

Sublette Center, to answer questions on March 25.

According to Werner's letter, the USDA requires contracts for professional services, including those for management partners, to be submitted for agency review to make sure the contracts comply with federal law.

In cases where an applicant has not completed a contract with a management partner, the USDA can still approve a loan and "obligate funds," but the contract must be given the green light by the USDA before the parties close on the loan and break ground on the project, Werner's letter continued.

"That pressure is off us, and that's one reason why we don't have to feel like we have to make a decision tonight," Fitzsimmons said.

The Sublette Center Board of Directors also advocated for delaying a decision following the meeting with Werner, said member Marilyn Jensen. The Sublette Center board issued a letter in response to the hospital district's request to recommend a management partner.

Jensen stated that her board was unable to recommend Star Valley Health or EIRMC/HCA as one body. She encouraged the hospital district to delay its decision and provide the center's board more time to research the remaining candidates.

Leaning toward EIRMC/HCA

Star Valley Health and EIRMC/HCA were both excellent choices, said Boman, and each represented different pros and cons, making the decision difficult.

Boman leaned toward EIRMC/HCA based on feedback from SCRHCD and Sublette Center employees.

"To me, the staff's opinion favors a lot, and there are a lot of staff that mean EIRMC," Boman said.

The hospital board possessed the ability to negotiate a favorable contract with EIRMC, Boman added.

"We can put in the contract whatever we

want," she said. "EIRMC will not own us. We would still be in charge."

Boman emphasized the vast resources EIRMC/HCA brought to the table in terms of legal, logistical, construction and professional training expertise.

Hoffman stated that she "stewed over the decision for months." From a personal standpoint, Hoffman said that Star Valley felt like a good pick. As a health-care professional, she believed that the opinions of the "boots on the ground" outweighed her own personal feelings.

Approximately 75 percent of SCRHCD and Sublette Center staff favored EIRMC based on surveys submitted to the board, Hoffman said.

EIRMC had a long history partnering with Sublette County to provide top-rate tertiary care, Hoffman explained.

"EIRMC is a natural partner," she added. "They have assisted us for 11 years bringing services to Sublette County to help us be more self-sufficient, increasing our abilities to respond to emergency situations in a timely manner and train our staff and keep them abreast of rapidly evolving medical care."

Going with Star Valley Health

Star Valley Health was a good fit for the community and its diverse stakeholders, Tanner said. Star Valley operated an independent critical access hospital and assisted living facility with a five-star rating from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Tanner added.

"In my opinion, they have rural health care figured out in Wyoming, and I think we could learn a lot from them," she said.

Ziegler pointed out differences in fee structures between the remaining candidates. Star Valley's proposal included a 1-percent cut of total revenue after initial startup costs while EIRMC/HCA requested a 3.4-percent cut.

EIRMC/HCA's higher fees would make it hard for the Sublette County Hospital District

to operate on a thin profit margin and become financially independent, Ziegler said.

Ziegler added that Star Valley Health and the Sublette County Hospital District shared similar values.

"EIRMC feels like it's just too big," he explained. "It's unwieldy and it's not going to provide the right-sized, detailed care that we need. Because Star Valley has walked the walk we're about to walk, they're going to know the pitfalls."

EIRMC/HCA operated on a different financial model, Fitzsimmons said. HCA, a for-profit, publically traded multinational company, was governed by profit, he added.

Fitzsimmons added that a primary concern was maintaining the viability of the Sublette Center. He worried that EIRMC/HCA did not prioritize assisted living facilities because they were not as profitable as hospitals.

Members of the public spoke in favor of Star Valley Health. Dave Racich stated he believed Star Valley offered an opportunity to incorporate rural medical centers in the region and put Sublette County on the map.

County commissioner Doug Vickrey, speaking as an individual, argued that Star Valley Health's facilities were similar in size to the hospital district's proposals and that Star Valley "understood the logistics of a small community."

Star Valley Health's management team said it looked forward to working with the hospital district.

"Star Valley Health is very pleased to have been selected as the managing partner for Sublette County's hospital district," said Dan Ordyna, CEO of Star Valley Health. "We are delighted to have an opportunity to partner with the hospital district in accomplishing its objective of keeping health care close to home. This partnership will help both Lincoln and Sublette counties emerge stronger by working together."

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