

Healthy Living

Merger, transfer agreement not quite ready for signing *Commissioners meet representatives from USDA*

By Robert Galbreath, rgalbreath@subletteexaminer.com

SUBLETTE COUNTY – A final agreement between the Sublette County Hospital District (SCHD) and Sublette Center to merge health care under one umbrella is undergoing “final touches,” Dave Doorn, SCHD administrator, reported to the Board of County Commissioners on Aug. 2.

A turnover in lawyers at the Sublette Center caused a brief delay in negotiations, Doorn added. The Sublette Center’s previous attorney left to pursue an “opportunity outside his current law firm,” compelling the center’s board to search for a new lawyer, explained Dawn Walker, Sublette Center administrator.

Walker confirmed their attorney is in contact with the SCHD’s lawyers even though the new attorney signed the engagement agreement to represent the Sublette Center the previous week.

“It’s not going to be reinventing the wheel, but he has not had a chance to completely review the document,” Walker added.

Commission chairman Joel Bousman asked when Walker thought a final draft agreement might be in place. Representatives from the Sublette Center board of directors planned to be on the agenda for the commissioners’ next meeting on Aug. 23 to “provide a more solid idea of the timeline,” Walker responded.

SCHD Chairwoman Tonia Hoffman stated that she and several SCHD trustees met with members the Sublette Center’s board to “impress upon them the importance of handling (the merger agreement) as soon as possible” and completing the process with accuracy.

The transfer agreement between the SCHD and county over ownership of the Pinedale Clinic and Public Health building is also awaiting a final draft from the county attorney, Hoffman said.

Commissioner Tom Noble stressed the need for a merger agreement to be in place before the county signed a transfer agreement.

“As things change, that transfer agreement changes every other day,” he added. “We’ll be a lot more set in stone once the merger is finalized.”

USDA delegation

Lorraine Werner, community programs director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in Casper, attended the commissioners’ Aug. 2 meeting to answer questions and introduce Glenn Pauley, the agency’s state director of rural development.

Werner praised the county and wider community’s determination to achieve the USDA’s approval of the SCHD’s \$32-million loan application.

Pauley said he was “fortunate” to be involved in the project. The USDA possesses “a lot of resources” to help rural communities build infrastructure, he added.

Pauley recognized the nearly 100-year effort to build a hospital in Sublette County.

“It’s an honor to be here, it’s an honor to work with people who went through such a hard process,” he said. “We really hope that this is the beginning, because we’re just here to help.”

Werner and the commissioners discussed the county’s \$20-million pledge to build a new long-term care facility. The USDA will monitor all funds to ensure the county’s money is spent only on the long-term care facility, Werner told the board.

The hospital district committed to pay for construction costs beyond \$20 million as stated in its agreement with the USDA, Werner said. If the project comes in below \$20 million, all amounts under budget would be refunded to the county.

Doorn and Hoffman thanked the USDA for its assistance during the application process.

“Lorraine and her staff have been great,” Doorn said. “We have a call on Monday mornings, and either Lorraine is on that call, or Justin Bailey, their architect, is on that call. We’re constantly talking about what we need to put into place to get the project rolling. I feel like we’re on track.”

Construction update

The SCHD and its general manager, Layton Construction, extended the final due date for bidding on the critical access hospital and long-term care facility from Aug. 3 to Aug. 10 to provide an opportunity for more mechanical companies to apply, Doorn reported.

“That was one area we are short on, but now we have three bidders, so we’re in good shape,” he said. “It looks like we had a good response.”

Representatives from Layton are slated to attend the Aug. 23 commissioners meeting to provide further updates.

In response to Vickrey’s question about the construction schedule, Doorn said the district hopes to begin groundwork by late September. The SCHD remains committed to relocating Public Health to a new space in an auxiliary building at the Sublette Center before work commenced, he explained.

Construction will hit pause once winter weather settles in, with work on the concrete foundation expected to pick up the following spring, Doorn said.

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