

Push on to remove Monte from hospital district boundaries

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By Steven Friederich

The Vidette

Elected officials and administrators from Summit Pacific Medical Center in Elma will ask the county commissioners to remove the Montesano area from the new hospital district proposed by Grays Harbor Community Hospital.

The Elma-based hospital district becomes the latest voices urging the county to adjust the boundaries to west of the Wynooche River.

Community Hospital is currently a non-profit, private entity. Voters in August will be asked to turn the hospital into a public one with proposed boundaries that stretch from the Satsop and Brady areas through Montesano, Aberdeen and out to the beaches. If voters approved the proposed public hospital district, it would garner a higher Medicaid reimbursement rate from the state, thanks to recently approved state legislation contingent on it being a public hospital district; and by using the new property tax authority that would come with the designation.

Summit Pacific CEO Renée Jensen says that the Montesano, Satsop and Brady areas had long been planned as a potential growth area for the existing hospital district and she has seen overwhelming support from Montesano residents to join with the Elma district one day soon.

“We are trying to send a message across the county that we are very supportive of them being a public hospital district,” Jensen said of Grays Harbor Community Hospital’s proposal. “We just need to make a slight adjustment to the boundary and we’ve been talking to the county commissioners about doing that. ... If we’re the East County hospital district, it would make sense to have the Montesano area as a growth area.”

Jensen says that Summit Pacific Medical Center had just conducted an analysis of the medical needs of the Montesano community and discovered that the area has three fewer medical providers than there should be. As part of the hospital district’s long-term strategy, Summit Pacific has been making plans to potentially add a clinic to Montesano to meet those needs.

Last week, elected hospital district commissioners unanimously agreed to a statement that would support Community Hospital becoming a public hospital, but urge the county to change the boundaries before the proposed hospital district goes on the ballot in August.

Jensen said that the hospital has heard “loud and clear” from Montesano residents that they would prefer to be part of the Elma-based district as an all-encompassing East County district, instead of joining the potential Aberdeen-based district.

“All of us have gotten feedback from people we know in Montesano, saying, ‘Can’t we be part of your district?’” Hospital Commission Chairman Drew Hooper says. “It’s not just a matter of not being part of a hospital district, but asking to join ours. And that’s an important thing.”

The move comes as Montesano City Council members discussed passing a resolution to take a stand on the issue, as well. However, unless a special meeting is conducted, the council does not meet again until May 13 — four days after the deadline for the county commissioners to submit the issue to the ballot. The county will conduct four public hearings on the matter the week of May 5 with plans on beating that May 9 ballot deadline.

The only way to really get out of the district is to ask the county commissioners before it's even on the ballot. A majority of voters would have to approve the hospital district measure. However, if voters in Montesano say "no," but a majority of voters elsewhere in the proposed district approve the measure, Montesano would still be in the hospital district.

State law empowers the commissioners to change the boundaries if they find an area of the proposed boundaries "unjustly or improperly included," according to state law.

At last week's Montesano City Council meeting, Councilman Pat Harrington and Councilwoman Marisa Salzer asked for a resolution talking about the hospital measure to be put on the next agenda. And Councilwoman Pam McElliott urged council members and Montesano residents to turn out and voice their opinion to urge the county to remove Montesano from the proposed hospital district.

McElliott said she attended a hospital forum in Montesano on April 21 and felt just about as confused as to why Montesano was being included as she did before she set foot in the forum.

She says hospital officials have not made their case.

"There were a lot of questions asked that were not answered," McElliott said. "Unfortunately, for Montesano to get out of the district, it's going to be up to the commissioners and each and every one of you with a 98563 ZIP Code needs to go to the commissioner meetings and state your opinion. ... It's worth fighting for."

Montesano Mayor Ken Estes says he plans to attend and oppose the inclusion of Montesano in the district and former Montesano mayor Walt Bussard also told the council that the city should be left out.

Renée Jensen says she's encouraging Summit Pacific elected officials and supporters to attend the county commissioner meetings.

Community Hospital CEO Tom Jensen says that the proposed boundaries for the new hospital district would likely have included the entire county had there not been an existing hospital district. Jensen says that as a level three trauma center and the only birthing center in the county, Grays Harbor Community Hospital serves the needs of the entire county.

The existing Hospital District No. 1 includes the cities of McCleary and Elma and the area in between.

During a recent interview, *The Vidette* posed Tom Jensen with the idea of leaving Montesano out of the proposed hospital district. Then, after they potentially win their election for a hospital district, to come back later and try to annex the area. That way, if Summit Pacific Medical Center wants to try their own annexation option, the hospital would have the time to do it — or Montesano residents could be given a choice between the two districts.

Jensen said his job is to run the hospital, not run political campaigns.

Jensen said he will ask the county commissioners to approve the boundaries as proposed, but would not lobby hard if they want to change the boundaries to take Montesano out of it.

Community Hospital has proposed a potential property tax levy of 50 cents per thousand for the new hospital district. Based on 2013 assessed values, a property tax of 50 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value would garner about \$2.5 million in annual revenue for the district, according to the Assessor's Office.

The East County hospital district collects \$454,393 and has a levy of 50 cents per thousand, according to county Treasurer Ron Strabbing.

Either way, for the Montesano area, that could mean an extra \$125 property tax on the typical \$225,000 home.

Summit Pacific Chief Financial Officer Will Callicoat says that the area in question between Satsop, Brady, Montesano and to the Wynooche River has the potential for raising an extra \$200,000 or so in property taxes for either hospital district.

Community Hospital would also get an extra \$2 million or so from increased Medicaid reimbursement rates from the state — just by becoming a public hospital. The combined \$4.5 million in added revenue would swing the hospital from losing \$2 million to \$3 million a year to making \$2 million to \$3 million a year. If nothing's done, the hospital's debtors could eventually take the hospital over — or the hospital would be forced to close some vital services, such as the birth center.

Callicoat says his findings show that Summit Pacific Medical Center is providing 50 percent of the emergency room visits to the people of Montesano. About 1,500 people in the past 12 months have gone to Summit Pacific from the ZIP code representing the Montesano area.

"We also provided almost 3,000 clinic visits to that ZIP code," Renée Jensen added.

"We were going to gradually move that way and now, all of a sudden, it's thrust upon us to make our voice known," Hospital Commissioner Louie Figueroa said.

"Now, that we're in Elma and we've doubled in size and we're growing like crazy, we would be very landlocked if we didn't have the opportunity to expand," Renée Jensen said. "We need to have steady growth over time to be sustainable. If their boundary was right up to our boundary, our growth would be stunted."

Community Hospital provided data that shows in 2013, there were 1,633 visits from Montesano-area residents to its own emergency room in Aberdeen. In addition, Community Hospital says there were 359 in-patient visits to address everything from chronic illness to orthopedic surgery and pediatrics; 28 uses of the hospital's birth center — the only one in the county; and 392 Montesano area residents that needed surgeries.

In fact, Community Hospital provided an information sheet that shows even though Summit Pacific's new hospital is in Elma, residents there still use Grays Harbor Community Hospital. The sheet notes that 386 Elma area residents used the hospital's emergency room last year. There were 95 in-patient visits, 23 uses of the hospital's birth center and 138 surgeries.

Some of the patients at Community Hospital might have first been seen in Elma. There are times when someone comes in Summit Pacific's Emergency Room and gets transferred to Aberdeen, depending on the situation.

Renée Jensen says this one disagreement with the folks at Community Hospital won't get in the way of working together in the future.

In the past year, Summit Pacific Medical Center has provided 1,000 referrals to Community Hospital.

And, just this week, because Community Hospital's CT Scanner is down, Summit Pacific has stepped up to accept referrals for CT scans from all parts of the county that need the service.

"Our primary care base growing and getting stronger only benefits them," Renée Jensen says. "Instead of all of our patients migrating to Thurston County, we're trying to keep them closer to home and that is a huge, huge benefit. And that helps the bottomline of Community Hospital. It is to everyone's benefit to make sure both hospitals are doing well — and not just for today. And, I hear that a lot, 'They're more desperate.' But we're not talking about today. When they make this boundary, this is for 50 to 100 years to come so we need to think about Summit's ability to be sustainable in the years to come."

East County ambulance providers including the Montesano Fire Department, Fire District 5 and Fire District 2 have all been using Summit Pacific Medical Center more often and are able to respond to local calls more quickly after dropping patients off.

That said, Hospital Commissioner Amy Thomason said she wholeheartedly disagrees that letting Community Hospital go bankrupt will help anybody in the county. Thomason said she was horrified that there were residents at a hospital forum in Montesano last week that felt that way.

"It's crazy," Thomason said.

"People don't understand the impact that could happen to all of us," Hooper added. "It's extremely important that Grays Harbor Community Hospital is successful. That is so important for the well being of our communities, not just Aberdeen, but all of us in Grays Harbor. But, at the same time, if area residents feel it's important that they're a part of our hospital district, then they need to voice that opinion."

Grays Harbor Community Hospital currently operates the Montesano Clinic in Montesano, which has doctors and a nurse practitioner. If Montesano were not in the Aberdeen-based public hospital district, then the future of the clinic would not be in stone, CEO Tom Jeensen says. It would require a special agreement with the Elma-based hospital district for the Montesano Clinic to continue operation. State law does not allow hospital districts to operate clinics in each other's districts without permission from the other district.

Hooper, Summit Pacific's board president, and CEO Renée Jensen said they don't see a problem in granting such a letter allowing the Montesano Clinic to continue operating.

"Grays Harbor Community Hospital having specialists in this area, no matter where they are, is a huge advantage for everyone," Hooper said. "We don't have an Ear, Nose and Throat doctor. That's not someone we're going to recruit and that's who they have in that office to help everyone in this county."

The Jensens, who are married and have a young daughter, say they may have disagreements — but keep work issues out of the household.

The county commissioners will conduct formal public hearings on the matter to specifically question the number of hospital district commissioners that will be on the ballot and the proposed boundaries. The hearings are at 2 p.m. and 5:30 p.m., Monday, May 5, and 9 a.m. and 5:30 p.m., Wednesday, May 7. All hearings take place at the County Administration Building in the first floor commission chambers in Montesano.