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Local News

Lawmakers, others oppose surgery center; patients on both s

By **NATHANIEL WEST**, Staff Writer

Wednesday, May 24, 2006

MATTOON -- It's no mystery why employees and board members with Sarah Bush Lincoln Health Center and the various Carle enterprises think the way they do about Urbana-based Carle Foundation Hospital's proposal to establish an outpatient surgery center on SBLHC's turf in Coles County.

However, area residents and officials with little or no direct affiliation with SBLHC or Carle said they have varying and complex reasons for endorsing either side.

During Wednesday's testimony to the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board at Lake Land College, local lawmakers and higher education officials opposed the surgery center proposal, while patients of the health care providers urged the planning board to make a decision that is best for all.

"This is the hardest issue I've faced in four years (as state representative)," said Rep. Chapin Rose, R-Mahomet.

"I refuse to believe that health care is a zero-sum game, (and) I think I speak for everyone who wishes it hadn't gotten to the stages it has gotten to."

He noted he is empathetic to local residents who belong to Health Alliance Medical Plans -- the Carle Clinic Association-owned insurance company that has no substantial contract with SBLHC -- because he and his mother used Health Alliance in his youth, and he recalls many drives to Champaign-Urbana for care at Carle Foundation Hospital or related facilities.

Rose said local residents, especially Health Alliance members, are "caught in a vise" over the surgery center issue.



Audience members listen to people speak at the podium during the public hearing on Wednesday at Lake Land College. Kevin Kilhoffer/ Staff Photographer

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But despite his affinity for the plight of Health Alliance members, Rose said he is against Carle Foundation Hospital's application with the state planning board.

"I still have a lagging doubt about how our community will look 10 years from now" because of another outpatient surgery center, Rose said, citing the "devastating" effect of multiple freestanding surgery centers in Danville.

"I have a great deal of concern about what a surgery center does to a (community) hospital," Rose said.

He noted he also is worried about certain "technical deficiencies" in Carle's application. He believes Carle does not account for health care facilities in Effingham, and Carle downplays the potential for-profit ownership role of physicians in the surgery center.

Meanwhile, state Sen. Dale Righter, R-Charleston, likewise said he opposes Carle Foundation Hospital's "certificate of need" application. Although Righter could not attend the hearing Wednesday, his statement was read aloud.

"After considerable discussion with health community and constituents on both sides of important issue, I (have) decided to submit this letter in opposition" of Carle's application wrote.

Like Rose, he appealed to the purpose of the planning board to keep health care services for local residents while deflecting potential harm to community hospitals and said the application by Carle still does not meet the criteria outlined in the recently renewed Illinois Facilities Planning Act.

"It would be unwise to put at risk (the) free or reduced-cost health care services to so many individuals," said Righter.

State Rep. Roger Eddy, R-Hutsonville, expressed similar sentiments via a letter to the planning board.

"We have 'certificate of need' legislation for a very good reason -- to make sure health providers are not harmed by duplication of services," Eddy wrote.

Meanwhile, both Eastern Illinois University President Lou Hencken and Lake Land College President Robert Luther indicated opposition to Carle's proposal.

Luther said the presence of another surgery center might have a negative effect on the hospital's ability to provide clinical experience to Lake Land's nursing students.

He said the relationship between SBLHC and Lake Land "has allowed Coles County to avert (nationwide) nursing shortage, (and) this partnership is key to the economic success of the region."

The surgery center "will not meet the needs of the people of East Central Illinois," said Luther, who previously served on the SBLHC Board of Directors. "A decision needs to be based on the needs of the community and the need does not exist."

Some of the most heartfelt testimony during Wednesday's hearing came from patients at SBLHC and Carle Foundation Hospital.

Jessica Cox, a 19-year-old resident of Marshall, delivered a tearful entreaty to the plan's opposition of Carle's application.

Cox, a cervical cancer patient, testified she is receiving treatment at the SBLHC Cancer no charge, and she believes a competing surgery center would threaten this type of care at the local hospital.

"Without them, I don't know where I would be," Cox said. "They are saving my life."

After relocating to this area from California, Linda Telford testified that she was denied insurance because of previous issues. So when she was diagnosed with cancer and racked up \$80,000 in medical bills at SBLHC, she said, the situation looked grim.

"But just before Christmas (in 2005), the (SBLHC) business office called to tell me my insurance had been written off," said Telford.

However, she said she fears a Carle surgery center would cut into the SBLHC revenue to the extent such charity possible.

"I thank God that Sarah Bush follows its mission and earns enough (money) to help people like me," Telford said.

But Health Alliance members also had emotional tales to tell, and urged the planning board to approve Carle's application.

"It is a matter of time and money; it is a matter of my time and money," said Ron Gholl, a retired Eastern Illinois University faculty member who must travel to Champaign-Urbana for his medical treatment because of his Health Alliance membership.

Charleston resident and Health Alliance member Carolyn Dever said she has driven several hours to Champaign County for cataract treatment, drives that a surgery center may have made unnecessary. "As I get older, I'm concerned that it will get harder to make the 100-mile drive to Urbana," said Dever.

Joann Meyer, a retired elementary school teacher and Health Alliance member from Champaign, testified about "traumatic" car rides back from Urbana with a "post-surgical" child.

"I believe we live in a country where free enterprise of business is healthy, vital and necessary," Meyer said in support of the Carle surgery center proposal.

Local resident and veteran Gene Stewart said, "I ask, why can't we have a choice? Is that not America? I served my country for freedom of choice."

Phyllis Strong, local resident and Health Alliance patient, spoke of eight different surgical procedures she or her husband have undergone in Urbana. "Many of these surgeries could have been performed right here in Coles County," she said.

"In this community, we need cooperation instead of dissension. In this community, we need Sarah Bush hospital and a Carle surgery center."

Local business owners also had their say at Wednesday's hearing.

"The cost is extreme to the local business owner who struggles to provide health-care to their employees," said Barbara Kauffman, co-owner and operator of an Arthur construction business, who supports the surgery center proposal.

Charleston restaurateur Mary Anne Farrar said she is in favor of the surgery center because of her poor experience she said she had at SBLHC.

"I was there for seven days, and it was horrifying," Farrar said. "My money and my insurance money are going to the wrong place."

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