



My Turn

Where's the beef?

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Some months have now passed since I became curious and then troubled by the governance and management of Holy Cross Hospital (HCH).

Though I have corresponded with HCH's board chair and with its CEO on a number of occasions, attended and expressed my views at several HCH board of directors meetings, and voiced my concerns in newspaper opeds and on radio, I have yet to receive any substantive response from HCH's governing authority to the issues that I have raised.

Presuming that the HCH board may have failed to clearly register the substance of my concerns, here's the "beef."

Oversight: Our community depends upon the HCH board to be vigilant overseers of the actions of the for-profit company (QHR) and the agents that it hires to manage and operate Holy Cross Hospital.

My confidence in the thoroughness with which this supervisory responsibility is exercised by the board was initially shaken by public statements of the hospital CEO regarding the depth and degree of the hospital's financial difficulties. That dire characterization seemed much at odds with the hospital's then most recent IRS 990 filing.

Furthermore, it turns out that this critical financial document had not actually been reviewed by all board members prior to its filing.

Then, there was the general surgeons compensation-threatening contract renegotiation initiative. This was pursued despite the CEO's earlier unequivocal warning that such action would be disastrous.

Nevertheless, the very course of action that was declared untenable was pursued. The surgeons reacted precisely as predicted: they resigned.

With this history of apparently inaccurate financial representations and conscious, counter-productive personnel actions taken in HCH's name, how can the community rest assured that the hospital board is seriously, competently and diligently discharging its near sacred oversight responsibility? Events suggest board failure on this score.

Secrecy: Authoritative sources on the governance of nonprofit organizations call for them to be maximally transparent. This is not merely my personal opinion.

Yet, the Holy Cross board deliberates almost exclusively in secret. Board members and candidates for board membership are required to sign a pledge of secrecy. Requests for opportunities to review significant documents or observe critical processes are summarily rejected.

How can the community effectively partner with an organization that is uniformly undisclosed of vital information? And how could elected public officials grant funding requests from an organization profoundly lacking in transparency?

Board structure and composition: The buck stops with the HCH board, the likely epicenter of hospital governance and management problems. Oversight and transparency failures are the predictable result of the problematic structure and composition of the HCH board.

Its nominating and appointment process has produced a governing authority that is not merely unelected, but closed, self-perpetuating, impenetrable, unresponsive, and unreflective of the broader community that it serves.

The fact that three board members have served an aggregate total of 69 years cries out for explanation, assuming that such protracted tenure can indeed be explained or justified? What incentive could there possibly be for these unlimited tenures? How can the community at large have confidence that its interests are being adequately represented by a board appointment process that refuses to seek the most talented and knowledgeable members of the community unless they live in particular parts of the county?

The HCH stance is once again at odds with what authoritative sources assert to be best practices for governance of non-profit organizations.

Failure to communicate:

“Public comment” is a regular part of monthly HCH board meetings. At such times, members of the community are permitted to address the assembled board. The routine board response to these public comments is silence.

Outside communications seems to enter a black hole, never again to be spoken of and never to receive a response. Since effective communication requires dialogue, the HCH board chair and/or its CEO have been invited to join me in a publicly broadcast conversation. Regrettably, this invitation has thus far been declined.

In a nutshell, my continuing concerns are with the compelling need for diligent Holy Cross Hospital board oversight, maximum organization transparency, and for urgent board action that turns away from a firmly entrenched norm of closed, self-perpetuating, impenetrable, unresponsive governance. Holy Cross Hospital, there's the beef!

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