



Editorial

Outreach before, not after big cuts

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Holy Cross Hospital is going through another round of painful layoffs. And once again, community members are calling for more transparency in how these important decisions are being made.

Hospital administrators announced this week that it was shedding 44 positions in order to shore up what board chairman Ron Burnham calls a “big hole” in the budget. Add that to the 12 employees who were let go in April 2011 and 31 additional layoffs in November 2012, and we’ve got a disturbing trend.

Not only is Holy Cross the primary health care provider in our community, it is also a major employer and a big economic driver. The impacts of job losses and reduced services hit our families and businesses hard. That’s why hospital administrators and the board should be reaching out to key members of the community to help with these hard decisions. For months, hospital officials have been sounding the alarm on their finances, arguing that they provide millions of dollars worth of care each year, but the bills go unpaid. Despite sizable allocations from our county government, the hospital still says it’s in dire financial straits.

Deciding where to make cuts has been a very closed process. No details are given before big changes are announced. There is no broad discussion of what services are most important. Patients, employees and the community as a whole have been forced to simply accept whatever the board and administrators choose.

In this latest round, we learn that intensive care services will be scaled back. Staff members say that might mean families will have to say good-bye to loved ones in a hospital somewhere else. That could be a hardship for the residents of Taos County who value family above everything else.

We aren’t in a position to say whether there was a better option. That’s the problem.

We applaud the hospital for hosting two public forums next week to explain the changes, but we wonder why this sort of discussion doesn’t happen before decisions are made.

No doubt the hospital takes these issues seriously. Administrators likely fear that a more public decision making process would turn into unproductive finger-pointing that could make a bad situation worse.

We understand that position, but we think there's a better way.

The hospital could contain some of the shock and outrage by reaching out to any number of trusted local experts. This includes key hospital staff, emergency services personnel, behavioral health providers, those who work with the elderly and disabled, representatives from our schools, and local government leaders.

This kind of group would be more representative of our diverse community. They could have an honest discussion about the kind of hospital we have, the kind of hospital we want, and the kind of hospital we can afford.

This group might not come to different conclusions than the existing board when faced with hard numbers, but it would at least offer some level of transparency. This sort of true outreach would prove that the hospital understands its role as a cornerstone of our community.

Holy Cross has a dedicated, capable staff, and it provides great care. But that message doesn't resonate if residents feel like they can't trust the hospital's leadership. As Holy Cross strives to hang on to local patients, it needs that trust now more than ever.