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Committee urges hospital to address doctors' resignations

By Andrew Oxford

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The administration and direction of Taos Health Systems were at issue last week during a packed meeting of an intergovernmental committee on the hospital May 7, raising questions of how far the body will wade into the hospital's management.

The latest outcry was prompted by the announcement late last month two doctors at Taos Health Systems tendered their resignations for reasons related to the hospital's management rather than financial considerations.

Doctors John Foster and Tze Yong will leave Holy Cross at in July, the committee learned. A third hospitalist, Dr. Ashley Pond, will retire in August.

The news prompted concerns little had changed at Holy Cross months after the intergovernmental committee began meeting in part to encourage more transparency at the nonprofit.

Staff and community members who spoke at the unusually well-attended meeting suggested they felt left out of the hospital's future.

"It's a matter of communication and respect and that affects morale," committee chairman and Taos County Commissioner Tom Blankenhorn said, summing up the impact of the doctors' resignations.

The committee unanimously passed a motion calling on hospital administrators to work towards retaining Drs. Foster and Yong. The motion also stated the committee heard "serious concerns" from staff involving communication and low morale that it believes deserves attention.

The frustrations of hospital staff belied the need for greater communication among the nonprofit's stakeholders, several committee members said. But the intergovernmental committee — which includes local elected officials, community members, hospital administrators and staff — was founded in part to facilitate such communication.

That left committee members wondering aloud what substantive role they can play in the hospital's management.

"I hear a deeper concern being addressed," committee member John Plummer said during the meeting. "What I'm hearing isn't normal life in a normal organization."

But "if all we do as a sounding board is hear you out and nothing changes," Plummer added, "we're doing more harm than good."

Blankenhorn suggested responsibility for acting on the committee's recommendations rests with the hospital's board. "I think the board has to recognize this is a real issue and provide the leadership necessary to address it," Blankenhorn told *The Taos News* .

But it remained unclear how the board and the hospital's leadership will respond to the committee's resolution or any future recommendations.

Outgoing Taos Health Systems board member Gus Córdova encouraged staff and community members to address their concerns directly to the nonprofit's board.

"I kind of wish the entire board had been here tonight," he said.

While some may be frustrated with the hospital's management, CEO Peter Hofstetter suggested "tough decisions must be made about consolidating job responsibilities, discontinuation of non-essential activities, and a general change in how the business operates."

Recent financial losses have prompted changes that "put stress on everyone," he wrote in an email to *The Taos News* . But those changes are vital to the overall health of the hospital, Hofstetter suggested.

"The healthcare industry is evolving at an unprecedented pace, and the administrative team, our managers, and our staff must evolve simultaneously," he wrote. "Failure to recognize and react to these changes – maintaining a head-in-the-sand mentality – will only put the security of Holy Cross Hospital in jeopardy."

It is unfair to characterize the entire hospital's staff as being demoralized, however, Hofstetter stated.

The CEO indicated administrators will work to keep the two doctors on staff while noting he could not comment fully on personnel matters.

But some staff and committee members seemed eager for substantive changes in the hospital's management.

"We pass resolutions and recommendations and I would hope the board takes those seriously," committee member, union leader and nurse Martha Jaramillo told *The Taos News* .

The announcement Drs. Foster and Yong would be stepping down followed negotiations between Holy Cross and a third-party company, Apogee, administrators had hoped would manage in-patient physicians at the hospital. Under such an arrangement, the doctors would have been Apogee employees. Administrators said they hoped the move would save money and improve efficiency. Initial plans to contract with Apogee were abandoned when it was determined such an arrangement would have limited financial benefit, Córdova said after the meeting.

Replacing the doctors could now prove expensive and comes as the nonprofit grapples with financial uncertainty, committee member and pediatrician Dr. Sylvia Villareal said.

The announcement the doctors plan to resign was reminiscent of the departure of several surgeons in 2013.

“If we have this incredible brain drain from the hospital, we are going to lose patents,” Jaramillo, the nurse and union leader, told the committee.

But committee member Dr. Loretta Ortiz y Pino suggested while losing Drs. Foster and Yong would be a “tragedy,” the hospital is resilient and had rebounded from the departure of surgeons last year. “It seemed like we were never going to be able to come back from that,” she said before citing an increase in the number of surgeries performed by doctors at the hospital. “We did recover.”