

My Turn

Hoped-for hope at Holy Cross Hospital

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What a difference a year makes! As a persistent critic of Holy Cross Hospital's governance and management, I could hardly believe my eyes.

Scanning the hospital's conference room during the open part of a recent board meeting, I was struck by the dramatically changed face of those in charge.

Gone, were almost all of the far too long-serving, change-resistant board members, a relatively recent board appointee is the newly elected chair, the board's executive committee is composed almost entirely of capable relative newcomers, and the new hospital CEO seems intent on energetically confronting and resolving festering management and governance problems, an impossibility under his predecessor's reign.

We may, at last, have the capable leadership that the hospital's talented and dedicated staff and our community require and deserve. While I have some ongoing concern regarding several governance issues, there is good reason for hope that these new faces will offer new possibilities. Though not always agreed with, one now feels heard and understood.

It is almost universally appreciated that our community's vital Holy Cross Hospital is in a precarious financial condition.

Its very survival will likely require the financial assistance of the people of Taos. A deadline for action on some sort rescue plan is rapidly approaching. It's a near certainty that without the infusion of public monies, the hospital will fail. The hospital's failure would be nothing short of catastrophic for Taos.

Our county commissioners may be understandably uneasy at the prospect of fashioning a hospital rescue by raising taxes on the people of what is said to be the second poorest county in the second poorest state in the nation. This unenviable status is, however, the arithmetic result of averaging widely varying levels of individual wealth. While many bear the crushing burden of poverty, others of us can and should be taxed more for the sake of our own health care needs and for that of our less financially secure neighbors. Robert Kennedy put it this way: "To whom much has been given, much is expected."

Hopefully, any additional tax liability will be structured in a way that mostly burdens those of us who can afford it.

So, where does that leave us?

Though there is simply no alternative to immediate rescue by Taos County, money alone will not fully solve the problem. The trust and support of the community must also be restored, and you can't buy that. As the hospital's new CEO, Bill Patten, has pointed out, "People have been voting with their feet." They have lost trust and have been seeking hospital services, care that Holy Cross is well able to provide, elsewhere.

The hospital board is to be applauded for having taken some noteworthy steps toward trust-building transparency. Nevertheless, a good deal more can and should be done. The current hospital crisis provides a rare opportunity for this to be effectively urged. Taking advantage of their fleeting opening, the representatives of the people might create a funding stream to rescue our hospital, but with some appropriate strings attached. For its own good and for the good of the people of Taos County, granting these needed public funds should include a quid pro quo containing trust-enhancing governance reforms like the following:

- n End closed HCH board and committee deliberations, except where disclosure is precluded by statute or where some competitive position would clearly be put at risk;

- n Provide for public observation and possible participation in future CEO recruitment;

- n Establish board member

term limits;

- n End gerrymandered manipulation of eligibility for board appointment;

- n Establish a mechanism for non-retention or recall of board members who lose the confidence of the community; I'm hopeful that the Taos County Commission will find a reasonable and appropriate path to our hospital's needed funding. A progressive mil levy based on assessed value might be the solution. I'm also hopeful that the Holy Cross board will do the right thing and institute additional reforms that will restore the trust and support of the community. As a personal act of faith, I'm "voting with my feet" and scheduling my own impending elective surgery at Holy Cross Hospital. I hope that others will do the same.

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