Union votes to back hospital tax

By Andrew Oxford

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Members of the union representing approximately 175 staff members at Taos Health Systems voted last week to support a proposed property tax for Holy Cross Hospital.

The backing of Local 1199 represents a step forward in the campaign for a 1 mill levy, which hospital board members and administrators have promoted as a means of upgrading equipment and infrastructure at the facility.

"We really want to work together with the hospital to make it a reality," said Martha Jaramillo, a nurse and union officer.

The nonprofit Taos Health Systems, which has lost millions of dollars in recent years, has deferred maintenance and equipment upgrades.

Jaramillo said catching up on those needs would have a big impact on the work of hospital staff.

While hospital administrators have said money from the tax will be used for capital needs rather than salaries, its passage is also expected to allow the cash-strapped nonprofit to improve pay for staff with other funds.

But Jaramillo said, "Even if I didn't get a raise, we still need a mill levy."

"Now, if something breaks, it's a financial emergency," she said.

Approximately half the union's membership at Taos Health Systems participated in a two-day vote on endorsing the tax, according to Jaramillo.

The total number of votes cast for and against the endorsement are not public.

Critics have argued the tax would be a bailout for the hospital and its contracted for-profit management firm after years of poor decisions.

Voters across Taos County will decide on the tax in a special election March 8.

If 90 percent of property taxes are collected, the mill levy is expected to raise approximately $1.28 million annually.

The tax would cost property owners across Taos County approximately $33 per year while the tax is in effect for every $100,000 their property is worth.

If passed, the tax would take effect in tax year 2016 and expire after four years.