

## **Landslide victory for hospital tax**

**By Cody Hooks**

*The Taos News, 3/10/2016*

The Taos County electorate overwhelmingly voted to support a mill levy to benefit Holy Cross Hospital, thanks in no small part to a concerted campaign by the hospital and a wide margin of victory among early voters.

The mill levy (property tax) passed after a special election Tuesday (March 8).

Of the 3,057 total voters, 2,323 were in favor of the tax while only 734, or about 24 percent, opposed the measure.

“With a vote this solid, the community is giving us the chance we asked for — to prove that it’s a new day. And we’re going to take advantage of that chance,” said Holy Cross Hospital CEO Bill Patten moments after the results were made public Tuesday night.

When hospital leaders lobbied the Taos County commissioners to place a tax on the ballot, Holy Cross officials knew a special election (as opposed to placing the question on the ballot during a normal election, such as a primary) would likely play to their favor because turnout is typically lower in off-season and special elections.

Holy Cross Hospital, one of the largest employers in the county, focused its energy internally, making sure to get hospital employees and their family out to the polls — a strategy that proved successful, especially with no mounted opposition to the mill levy.

Ultimately, those early and steady efforts paid off. Of 1,753 early voters, 80 percent voted in favor of the measure. Opponents of the tax would have needed to show up in droves to overturn that early lead.

But not everyone made it to the polls Tuesday.

Though early voting was available a month prior to the election, plenty of people were confused about where to vote when Tuesday came around.



**Holy Cross Hospital CEO Bill Patten, second from the right, reads the mill levy election results to a team of doctors, nurses and hospital employees in the Taos County Council Chambers, Tuesday (March 8).**

**Katharine Egli**

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The county operated only 18 consolidated polling places, half as many as a usual election. Opting for the cheaper version of a full-fledged election ultimately benefited the hospital, which is on the hook for the cost of running the election.

While Taos County voters convincingly supported the tax, several outlying communities did not. In Vadito, 10 voters were against the measure while seven supported it. In Amalia, the tally was 17 opposed and 13 in favor.

When asked by *The Taos News* if any efforts are planned to increase health-care services for those communities, Patten said, "We have to be very careful about picking the services we try to take external of our campus."

He said the hospital is exploring the idea of a mobile medical unit that could extend primary care and services like dental and mental health into areas with no coverage at all. But that is a conversation for the future.

"We can't set ourselves up with something that's unsustainable," he said.

Instead of over-promising and under-delivering, the hospital wants to nurture the good graces of the larger community and avoid a "black eye" like the one caused by the shuttering of a clinic in Pe-asco.

On the heels of the mill levy election victory, Patten emphasized the revenue generated from the new tax will be used solely to shore up infrastructure and make necessary upgrades to medical equipment, such as monitors in the operating rooms.

The tax is expected to raise about \$5 million over four years, at which point the mill levy will sunset.

Holy Cross Hospital will still budget for capital improvements in the coming years, Patten said, but to the tune of \$500,000 instead of \$1.2 to 1.6 million a year. The new tax won't bankroll any major expansions, but it does save the hospital from dipping into its operating budget. In turn, that preserves existing services.

"We have to have a healthier bottom line to afford those departments that don't make money, like diabetes and remote services," he said.

And a healthy bottom line is a precarious thing.

The hospital suffered an operating loss of about \$21 million from 2010-2015. For the first time in six years, the hospital is on track to make a profit, albeit a thin one. Patten called the hospital's finances "fragile" in an interview leading up to the election.

"Where do we go from here? A lot of hard work," Patten said.

The hospital is now jumping into the process of reprioritizing the list of capital needs. "It's not as simple as looking at a list," Patten said.

Old engineering assessments have to be re-evaluated and old price quotes have to be recalculated, which could lead to "more fundamental" conversations than simply reordering an existing list.

Meanwhile, hospital and county leaders are strategizing and laying out the final details for how to get the tax money leveraged and put to work. When the moment to cut a check does pass, they'll "hit the ground running," Patten said.

He added the hospital will have three steps of approval for spending the mill levy revenue — including final approval from the Taos County Commission. Besides those public records, Patten said the funds will be tracked on the hospital's website in order to remain accountable to the taxpayers.

"We have the luxury of a little bit of time to make sure we really do this right," he said.



**Christine Romero casts her vote on the mill levy to support Holy Cross Hospital at the Taos High School polling place, Tuesday (March 8).**

**Katharine Egli**

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