

My Turn

Questions linger on 'critical access' as residents wait for more specialists

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Taos County residents overwhelmingly approved a mill levy to improve the financial status of Holy Cross Hospital. CEO Bill Patten assured us the monies would fully benefit our community by upgrading the hospital, bringing in more physicians and making it financially viable.

To my dismay, mid-2016 we learned that Holy Cross officials once again proposed revenue changes, this time making HCH a "critical access" hospital. Surprised and concerned, I wrote a letter to *The Taos News* editor in response to this proposal, then heard nothing further.

We recently learned that after his initial suggestion, Mr. Patten realized the reaction to this change was not a "slam dunk."

This is not surprising. According to *The Taos News* article by J.R. Logan, "the hospital has spent months trying to convince its own staff the change is the right move" and not all staff are in agreement.

Now the proposal has come to the fore. The op-ed piece by John H. Plummer in the Jan. 12-18 edition of *The Taos News* confirmed my suspicions that, indeed, changing our local hospital to a critical access designation might not be an asset to Taos County residents or Holy Cross. Mr. Plummer pointed out unsettling aspects. He noted that a patient who is in need of hospitalization after 96 hours must be discharged, but cannot receive a doctor's authorization to be admitted to an acute care hospital and receive Medicare benefits. Mr. Steve Rozenboom, the Holy Cross CFO, informed me this information is incorrect. However, Mr. Rozenboom agreed that some patients could be adversely affected by the 96 hour restriction. Medicare patients without supplementary insurance will face the burden of paying more for outpatient services and the hospital could be faced with a greater financial burden by shouldering additional indigent cases. In response to this concern, Mr. Rozenboom told me that some critical access monies might be set aside to take care of non-payments. Taos County residents are still waiting for more specialists.

No Medicare recipient should have to face losing hospitalization because of the average annual 96 hour ruling. Many Medicare recipients are already financially strapped and unable to pay any or additional outpatient costs. Would the hospital solidly commit to shouldering this financial burden? Mr. Plummer suggests a study needs to be conducted to prove that the designation would bring in more physicians.

Although community endorsement may still be in question, it is my understanding the Holy Cross board has already made its decision and is preparing to apply for the critical access designation. If this action is true, I would hope the board would temporarily put the application process on hold.

The future of Medicare and the Affordable Care Act is in jeopardy. Wouldn't plunging blindly ahead be foolhardy? Holy Cross could be saddled with a program that will no longer exist. Holy Cross might be more financially compromised, or worse.

Rusnell is a resident of Ranchos de Taos.

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