

## A new direction

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 28 April 2023 05:59

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### City, county cautiously optimistic for RMCH changes

Changes are afoot at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital. While many are positive, it's also revealed that the hospital owes the city \$1.1 million in back utility payments.

City officials have expressed their desire to work with the county to keep the hospital's doors open as the county started taking steps to take the hospital over and three hospital board members resigned late last month.

Gallup-McKinley County Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Bill Lee has taken over as chairman of the hospital board in their wake. Remaining board members are Genevieve Robran, regional director of Presbyterian Medical Services; semi-retired physician and an assistant professor of military and emergency medicine at the Uniform Services University of Health Sciences; and RMCH Chief of Staff Dr. Kimberley Collins.

The board will meet next week and will put a system in place to solicit resumes and start looking for replacements for the board members who resigned.

McKinley County already owns the hospital itself and the land it sits on. The county commission

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voted late last month to spend \$6.78 million to buy three clinics surrounding the hospital, a key part of the RMCH health care complex. But at the time they didn't know RMCH hadn't paid the clinics' city utility bills for about a year, Mayor Louie Bonaguidi said.

Although the city filed a lien against the hospital over the bill, Bonaguidi said it's more about protecting the city from getting stuck than putting the squeeze on the hospital.

"We can make concessions that there won't be any interest. We don't want to do anything to ruin the sale of it," he said. "I don't think legally we could forgive the bill. It's not right to say to ratepayers 'we're going to forgive this \$1.1 million.'"

City and county leaders met April 11 to discuss the path forward.

"Everything with the county and the city, we are going to be a unified front. We came up with some good ideas," Commissioner Robert Baca, Dist. 3, said afterward. "I see some sunshine on the other end of this."

County Manager Anthony Dimas hopes to reassure the community that the county appreciates the city's support and cooperation.

"We are working hand in hand with the city and RMCH to make sure the doors don't close," Dimas said.

Lee said a meeting between city and county staff is expected next week to work out a payment plan.

Another item in the works is formation of an independent hospital advisory council that will be run through the Chamber of Commerce, in response to a longstanding request from activist group Community Health Action Group. CHAG sounded the alarm about problems at the hospital in late 2021.

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The group still wants a seat on the hospital board and a different relationship with Community Hospital Corp., a management company the former board hired in May 2021. Lee said that relationship is changing.

“We’re going to transition CHC out of a full management position into a consulting position. They can be beneficial with their buying power nationwide to help the hospital,” Lee said. “We’re going to keep that relationship intact but we also want to start transitioning more into a locally controlled hospital.”

That’s music to CHAG leader Connie Liu’s ears. The group asked to sever the CHC management contract a year ago and is ready to move forward.

“We have a very hard road ahead and it’s going to take everyone pulling together in the same direction to move us where we need to go,” Liu said. “It’s very clear that a lot of things need to be fixed at the hospital...We want to see hospital leadership that is able to communicate these changes and articulate a 1-, 5-, 10-year plan for the hospital.”

CHAG blames CHC for creating conditions the group says were driving out staff and putting patients at risk, but some of today’s problems predate CHC.

“The reason part of this deal was so critical is that previous administration had leveraged a \$4 million loan with a Texas bank and put the clinics up for collateral. That note was close to being foreclosed on, so we needed to take care of that,” Lee said, adding the county’s purchase of the hospital will “clean that up” and bring a cash infusion to help pay vendors.

There are other positive signs for the hospital’s future: The hospital has applied to the federal Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services to become a Critical Access Hospital, which will guarantee a better minimum reimbursement for patients covered by those programs – a significant portion of RMCH’s clientele.

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Lee hopes to have six new doctors on staff within the next month, something of a coup.

“It’s hard enough to get doctors and nurses into the state, let alone into Gallup. With the publicity the hospital has had, that makes it that much more difficult. I think we are finally turning a corner,” Lee said.

*The Sun* reached out to the hospital for comment on this issue, but no one responded before press time.

By Holly J. Wagner  
Sun Correspondent