

Under new management

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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RMCH CEO aims to meet challenges, improve communication

New Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital Interim CEO Bill Patten has a message for the community:

“Be patient with us. Change is never easy, even if it’s welcome change.”

Patten is mustering the troops in response to a notice McKinley County sent to Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services management with a demand to pay \$1.5 million in back rent within 180 days and meet three other conditions, including accounting for mill levy funds, by Jan. 15. He’s already getting started on their pleas for transparency with the community.

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“After meeting with [the county], I understand that they have their issues and part of my job here is to address those issues and be a good partner with them,” Patten said.

Evicting RMCH would be a last resort, county officials said, but they’re frustrated with the lack of communication from previous management, especially on financial matters.

“We don’t want to, but there has to be some change. We cannot continue to go down this road. We have a responsibility to the community to be fiscally responsible,” County Manager Anthony Dimas said.

Dimas went into detail about how much the county has forgiven the hospital’s past debts.

“We forgave them the rent earlier in the year, close to \$2 million. Five or six years ago the county forgave another \$5 million,” he said. “They are currently at \$1.5 million in debt again. The county has responsibilities to other community members and other programs and projects.”

ISSUES AT HAND

The hospital has been struggling financially for several years, contributing to staff turnover, facility issues and department closures. Patten said jobs one and two for him are stabilizing the situation and catching up on the hospital’s bills.

The triggering event for the Nov. 14 notice was a letter alerting the county that RMCH was failing to respond to maintenance issues, including a leaky roof, at the dialysis center across the street from the hospital.

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“That was the straw that broke the camel’s back. We have a lot of issues,” Dimas said.

RMCH leases the dialysis center building from the county and subleases to U.S. Renal Care Inc., which operates the clinic. The county received a copy of a letter from U.S. Renal Care’s attorney to RMCH in late October, saying the maintenance issues put the hospital in breach of the sublease agreement.

“The roof caused water damage on ceiling tiles and wall and all that,” Dimas said.

A NEW CONTRACT

Dimas and District 3 Commissioner Robert Baca met with Patten and the hospital board’s executive committee Nov. 15.

“We asked them to terminate their lease with U.S. Renal and we would contract with them directly. Meanwhile, the county has to come up with about \$150,000 for a new roof,” Dimas explained.

Patten said he supports that change as long as it’s what U.S. Renal wants.

That still leaves the issues of back rent and accounting for RMCH’s share of mill levy funds, which Dimas estimates at about \$2.7 million per year, for the last three years. Mill levy funds come from property taxes the county collects.

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“Since day one we have been working to do the best with the hospital,” Baca said. “We just need them to do the same with us. We’re not trying to close them, but ... everybody else is owed money.”

County officials left the Nov. 15 meeting with an understanding that Patten would try to provide the county with the mill levy accounting within a couple of weeks.

Patten confirmed his intent to have the mill levy accounting to the county by Dec. 14, and described his plans to meet the county’s demands for continued dialogue with the county manager and commissioners and open and transparent communication with RMCHCS employees and the community.

The hospital mill levy allotment is three mills, but Patten said he believes the hospital might be eligible for up to four and a quarter mills. He’s looking into how to make that change once the accounting issues are sorted out.

STRENGTHEN BONDS

Patten also wants to let some fresh air into the hospital’s relationship with the community.

“Part of my job is to make sure that people know what is going on. Whether that is the board, my medical staff or the community,” he said. “Part of my responsibility is to make sure that folks know what is going on. It is work that I had already planned to do so it was an easy commitment for me to make.”

He’s already started meeting with medical staff and plans to continue a practice he started at other hospitals, frequent all-staff meetings that address each of four staff segments with an update of how the hospital is doing financially and operationally, complete with a Q&A at the

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end. Those sessions would be posted to the RMCH intranet to make sure they reach people who were unable to attend.

He also plans to do short videos recapping hospital board meetings and post those to YouTube to give the public access.

Patten hasn't yet had time to meet with the new community advisory board – the county dropped its dunning notice his second day on the job – but will see where it fits into the future. At press time that panel hadn't had its own first meeting yet.

"It is important that we not have a shadow board or a second board. I understand the need for issues to be addressed with the community, but governance is something that has to be very well thought out and very well controlled," Patten said. "Part of my job would be to limit, if not remove, the sense that there would be a need for a group of that type."

Patten plans to seek funding from all available sources from local, state and federal governments as well as reaching out to service clubs and other community groups to revive the hospital's philanthropic arm.

The community can help support the hospital by having routine, non-emergency procedures done there instead of looking to Albuquerque or other places.

"One of the things that we need is volume. Voting with your feet. We are close enough to Albuquerque that some people will fall into the 'bigger is better trap,'" Patten said. "Keeping volume local is essential to our success."

What happens if the hospital can't come up with the money?

"They have 180 days to figure it out," Baca said. "We know that the \$1.5 [million] is going to be tough, just like any other bill that they owe. We're just like any other vendor. The only difference

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is we're basically the vendor that takes care of the roost."

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