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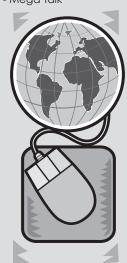
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Hospital looks to slice expenses

By DOUGLAS MELVOLD Jackson County Regional Health Center board members and administrators are searching for ways to cut costs in an effort to avert a projected \$1 million operating loss for the current fiscal year.

Hospital board members discussed concerns with growing operating losses during a board of trustees meeting Tuesday afternoon, Feb. 24.

The cost of increased physician coverage, bad-debt write-offs that have nearly doubled in the past year and growing charity care expenses have contributed to the operating loss, board members were told.

The board on Tuesday adopted a property tax levy of \$850,000 for 2009-10, the amount recommended by the staff and the same amount it has been for the past several years.

No one spoke at a public hearing preceding the board's action.

The current property tax rate of \$1.16 per \$1,000 taxable valuation is expected to decrease next year because of increased valuations.

Donna Roeder, hospital finance director, reported that as of Jan. 31, seven months into the hospital's 2008-09 fiscal year, the hospital was showing an operating loss of \$600,342 on revenue of \$8.0 mil-

She said revenue is running five percent under budget while expenses are nearly at the budgeted level.

Operating revenue includes most revenue sources, including patient charges and Medicare reimbursement. It doesn't include revenue from property taxes, gifts and a few other sources

When the property tax revenue and other non-operating income are figured in with operating revenue, the overall loss was reduced to \$22,371 as of the end of January,

For January alone, the hospital recorded an operating loss of \$68,251 on total revenue of \$1.08 million.

Property tax income and other non-operating revenue brought the month barely to the break-even point, with a gain of just \$344.

If the losses continue at the current pace, the hospital will end its fiscal year on June 30 with a \$1 million operating loss, excluding tax revenue, board President Kevin Burns noted.

He said the board held a lengthy discussion of its financial status during a Finance Committee meeting earlier Tuesday.

The hospital's administrative team and management team will be meeting in the coming days to come up with ways to stem the flow of red ink, Burns said.

A special meeting of the board is expected, possibly during the second week of March, to act on administrative recommendations, Burns said.

He did not say what those may be. "We're trying to get ahead of the curve a little bit, or at least no fall further behind," Burns said. "Some changes are going to be made and we don't know yet what those are going to be."

Board member Dwain Trenkamp recalled that the hospital recorded an operating loss of \$262,000 last year.

"We thought we had a poor year last year with a \$262,000 loss and we're looking at a million-dollar loss this year.

"We are showing concern and we want to make sure it's conveyed to the public that we are hopefully on top of it and we will take action to correct it."

Roeder said the hospital's move last year to have a physician on duty in the emergency room 24 hours a day, seven days a week costs the hospital approximately \$780,000 a year.

Despite that increased service and expense, the hospital hasn't seen any increase in volume to help offset the cost, she noted.

'Nevertheless, we think it's a valuable service to the community to have an emergency room," she

The 43-bed hospital's bad-debt expense is running an average of \$80,000 per month, for which the hospital receives no Medicare reimbursement, Roeder said.

"So, essentially people, because of poor economic times, are just not paying their bills," she said.

The third major reason for the loss is an upswing in charity care cases. Roeder said the hospital will provide more than \$150,000 in charity care or financial assistance, three times the \$50,000 awarded last year.

Curt Coleman, hospital executive director, noted that the hospital is holding the line on its tax asking despite the temptation to increase taxes to offset the higher expenses.

He said hospital officials first will study ways to increase the efficiency of the hospital's operations.

"In many ways, it's easier for us get as lean as we can, to streamline where we can and look at those changes before we start to ask patients to do without services," he

"But certainly looking at services and the overall effect they have on the hospital's bottom line is something we now have to take a look at.

"Our goal today is not to create panic, but to raise awareness that our situation is growing worse and before it gets to the point where we're forced to lose services to keep our hospital going, we're going to be pro-active and start to take some steps," Coleman added.

Burns noted that the operating loss doesn't leave room for purchase of major capital equipment items that are needed.

Among those needs are a new CT scanner, which carries a price tag of \$400,000, and a new ambulance, which runs in the \$125,000 to \$150,000 range.

The hospital's oldest ambulance

is a 1993 model and needs to be replaced, Burns said.

A remodeling project in the hospital's pharmacy will be necessary because of changes in regulations, he said.

"We don't know yet what the cost of that is going to be, but it's something we really can't put off because of regulation changes we have to comply with," he said. "So we have to get the operating budget under control to be able to afford those things.'

Board member Gloria Jorgensen urged residents who owe the hospital money to contact the hospital and make payment arrangements.

"We aren't asking for everything paid in full at one time, but I think it's important for us as citizens to honor the debt that we have," Jorgensen said.

She called it "unconscionable" that some hospital employees owe money and refuse to pay.

"Don't assume that even a small payment is not important or appreciated," Coleman said.

Roeder noted that the hospital does not charge interest or any kind of service fee on unpaid balances.



Gertrude Derganz, drawing winner, and Dianne Barker, Maquoketa Sentinel-Press circulation manager

Derganz wins \$100 in newspaper drawing

By KELLY GERLACH

Gertrude Derganz didn't even realize there was a \$100 cash prize drawing. She simply wanted to update the subscription she's been renewing for the past 55 years or so.

Derganz, who lives in a farmhouse outside Maquoketa, was selected as the winner of a \$100 bill from the Maquoketa Sentinel-

The drawing was open to anyone who became a new subscriber or renewed a subscription between Feb. 1 and Feb. 13. Those 166 subscribers' names were thrown into a large barrel and Derganz's name was pulled out on Feb. 16.

She was surprised and delighted by the news.

Derganz and her husband moved to the farmstead in 1951.

"Things were just so tight we didn't have the money to subscribe when we first came here," she said. She was then approached to be-

come a subscriber during a 1953 newspaper subscription drive. Still strapped for cash, Derganz told the woman she couldn't afford the \$3 yearly rate.

"Then my husband came home and he said Bertha Taylor had asked him to subscribe and he said yes," Derganz said, her eyes lighting up as she laughed at the

Her subscription has not lapsed

Derganz said she enjoys reading the "Way Back When" column and editorials, as well as the magistrate news, recipes and obituaries...

"Well, I don't *like* the obituaries but I want to see if someone I know died," she quickly explained.

"It's a nice local paper," said Derganz, who celebrates her 79th birthday Monday, March 2.

She said she was looking forward to spending her unexpected