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Board unanimously adopts levy

By DOUGLAS MELVOLD

The Jackson County Regional Health Center Board of Trustees this week approved a property tax levy of \$850,000, the same amount the board has levied the past several years.

No comments were received during a public hearing the board held Tuesday, Feb. 23, before it unanimously adopted the levy.

The levy will produce a tax rate of approximately \$1.16 per \$1,000 of taxable valuation, said Donna Roeder, hospital finance director.

The levy is part of the hospital's overall budget for the 2010-11 fiscal year, which begins July 1. The budget calls for \$15.8 million in spending.

Board members said earlier that while they could increase the levy to raise needed additional funds, they wanted to hold the levy at the current rate because of the effects of the economical situation on area families.

Of the total levy, \$21,951 will be collected from utility excise taxes, Roeder noted. The remaining \$828,049 will be raised in property taxes countywide.

Of the amount to be raised from property taxes, \$192,487 will go into the hospital's general fund. The amount is set by the state.

Another \$120,853 will supplement the hospital's share of FICA payroll taxes for Social Security and Medicare. Some \$107,172 will help pay for the hospital's contribution to the Iowa Public Employee Retirement System fund.

Another \$215,050 in property taxes will help pay the hospital's business insurance premiums.

And \$192,487 will help support the hospital's ambulance service. Roeder noted that the hospital lost approximately \$380,000 on the ambulance service for the year that ended June 30, 2009.

"So this is definitely a badly needed supplement of the taxes," Roeder noted.

Among the financial challenges the hospital will face during the coming fiscal year will be further decreases in the reimbursement rate the

hospital receives due to state and federal budget cuts.

And Wellmark Blue Cross-Blue Shield has notified the hospital that it will slice its reimbursement to the hospital next year by \$175,000.

"Those cuts are real and pretty deep for us," Roeder noted.

At the same time, she noted that the hospital is required to continue implementing electronic health records. The hospital is required to have all records converted to electronic means by 2015.

She noted that the computer software and hardware to accomplish the task will cost more than \$500,000. Added to that expense will be additional staff for the job.

"So that's a very new, big challenge for us," she said.

On the revenue side, Roeder noted that the hospital is continuing to write off \$80,000 to \$90,000 a month—nearly \$1 million a year—in bad debts it deems are uncollectible. She blamed much of the continuing bad debt situation to the economy and unemployment.

She noted that the bad debt situation has not improved this year.

She said the hospital offers another \$150,000 per year in financial assistance to low-income families.

Other challenges facing the hospital include staff shortages in the therapy departments. Contracting for coverage in that area and in the emergency room now costs the hospital \$1 million a year.

The board recently cut costs in the emergency room by having it staffed with a nurse practitioner or physician assistant rather than a physician during weekdays.

Roeder also reported that the hospital's finances experienced "an extremely disappointing month" during January.

The hospital in January incurred an operating loss of \$121,875. Nonoperating revenue from property taxes, interest income and donations re-

duced the net loss during the month to \$42,198.

Seven months into the hospital's 2009-10 fiscal year, shows an operating loss of \$54,348 and an overall gain of \$605,225 after taxes, interest and donations are included.

Also during January, the hospital recorded two baby deliveries, 36 surgeries, 1,332 outpatient registrations, 315 emergency room visits, 66 ambulance runs, 2,515 laboratory tests and 243 home-health nursing visits.

In other business, the hospital board voted unanimously and without comment to renew its management services agreement with Finley Hospital of Dubuque for a 16-month term that will begin March 1 and continue through June 30, 2011.

The hospital will pay Finley Hospital \$81,179 for the term of the contract. The fee represents an increase of about \$1,600 over the current fee, said Curt Coleman, hospital executive director.

The hospital board has been discussing the possibility of affiliating with another hospital organization.

Coleman also reported that plans are under way to start an allergy outreach clinic at the hospital.

Dr. Brad McClimon, allergist and a new partner at the Medical Associates clinic in Dubuque since July of 2009, has request the clinic to see current patients who reside in the Maquoketa area.

Details, including the start date, have not been determined.

Coleman also reported that the hospital's new CT scanner is scheduled to be installed next week.

CT scans will be available at the hospital without interruption through use of a mobile scanner for two weeks while the hospital's current scanner is being removed and the new unit installed, Coleman emphasized.

The new scanner is being acquired through a lease.



This snow caterpillar has everyone pining for summer and wondering exactly how many thousands of real caterpillars could fit inside the snow sculpture.



Area fishermen would sure have a story to tell if they caught this fish in the Mississippi or Maquoketa rivers.

Snow sculptures catch the eye of motorists, walkers

A lot of vehicles travel down Dunham Court, the short alley that connects South Prospect and South Vermont streets in Maquoketa.

Why? The Darin Musel family used its most plentiful winter resource – snow – to create fish and caterpillar sculptures in the backyard, visible

only from Dunham Court.

The newspaper received four or five calls from Maquoketa residents who drove by and caught sight of the giant fish and caterpillar. The callers wanted to share the information with the public so everyone can enjoy the winter handiwork.

Don't worry. The snow sculptures are not life-size. Motorists and walkers can quite easily see them from the road and sidewalk. The snow sculptures are hard to miss – about the height of a child's bicycle – not the traditional snowman created from three progressively larger balls of snow.

MSP photo by Kelly Gerlach