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## **Gritman may sell home health and hospice**

*Advisory board chairman wants more time to review plan*

MOSCOW - Members of the Gritman Medical Center Board of Directors are scheduled to meet Wednesday and possibly take action on a proposal to sell the hospital's home health and hospice operations to a private company, Board Chairwoman B.J. Swanson confirmed.

But an article in the medical center's newsletter, published Friday, makes it sound as though a final decision has been made. It appears under a headline that reads, "Home Health and Hospice To Transfer Ownership."

The article states: "After spending a great deal of time deliberating and considering alternatives, we are pleased to have found a solution that will continue the high quality care that our patients expect. Family Home Care of Spokane has a similar mission and vision as Gritman. In transferring our Home Health & Hospice services to FHC, our patients and their families can be assured that exceptional care will continue to be provided." That statement appears in the newsletter above the names of Swanson and Jeff W. Martin, president and chief executive officer of Gritman.

Swanson, contacted Friday afternoon, agreed the situation is confusing, but said, "It may seem to be a done deal, but it's not." Until the board meets and votes, nothing is official, she said. The center's executive board did vote to sell the services, but the entire board must approve it, she said. She did add she fully expects the board to approve the sale when it does meet.

But Mike Curley, chairman of the Hospice of the Palouse Community Advisory Board, has asked for more time to review the proposal.

"We don't want to hold things up," Curley said. "We want an appropriate amount of time to be diligent about the investigation of these things."

Swanson said the hospital has continued to lose money on its home health and hospice services. "We certainly don't want to close our doors, but the losses have been significant," Swanson said, "to the point that Gritman can no longer subsidize the losses."

Curley said he's disappointed that advisory board members were not asked to be involved earlier in the process. "They've been working on a plan for over a year to transfer home health and hospice out of Gritman. It would have been easy enough for us to ride along with it and maybe come up with other options."

Advisory board members met recently, Curley said, and decided to pursue two tasks - look for other viable options, and investigate Family Home Care. "We're not against it (the potential sale) because we don't know enough to be against it," he said. "But I think a different question is what other options do we have? Who are these guys."

Swanson said Family Home Care is the same business that bought Whitman Home Health and Hospice in Colfax nearly three years ago. "We're pleased with the reputation they have. Our commitment is to continue to provide

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home health and hospice services in the community, even though Gritman is no longer able to do it because hospital-based just doesn't work."

Curley said there are legitimate questions about selling the nonprofit services to a profit-motivated company. What's more, he said, there is an \$800,000 trust fund dedicated to hospice use, adding advisory board members have questions about what will happen with the money.

"Our commitment is to use those funds for hospice patients," Swanson said. "That will not change." The hospital's newsletter that was issued Friday says: "Hospice trust funds will continue to be retained by Gritman Medical Center in a separate dedicated account. The funds will be used to honor the original intent of the donors by assisting hospice patients of the Palouse."

Swanson said she was "as leery as anyone" about selling to a for-profit company. But she said she's met with the owner, Mike Nowling, twice and has received positive reviews from Whitman Home Health and Hospice officials about how their sale worked out. "They have an excellent reputation in Whitman County and the Gritman board's idea was to absolutely not close it down and leave a gap in our community," Swanson said. "So we thought this was the best opportunity we had and that's probably the choice we will make."

Nowling said he has owned Family Home Care for about eight years and the company has a 40-year history of providing quality care in the region. He said he's eager to work with Gritman and is willing to talk with anyone who might have concerns.

Swanson said Family Home Care could have office space at Gritman Medical Center, and she predicted the company would do local hiring. "So all of the Gritman Home Health and Hospice employees will have the opportunity to work for Family Home Care," Swanson said.

About 15 full-time employees work at Gritman, with another five to 15 part-time employees.

Nowling confirmed that if the sale is made, he will do everything possible to hire locally and give current employees a chance to make the transition. He said the quality of care currently provided is excellent.

As to Curley's concerns the hospice advisory board has been left out of the loop, Swanson said, "There was an advisory board and I know it has not met regularly lately. They've kind of left it up to Gritman. We've asked them to make comments on this, and how we can do this better."

Curley said he and other advisory board members are trying to catch up. "The advisory board is trying to be in the loop right now. Things have been kind of going in stages, but somebody stepped on the gas in the last week."