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Proposal would turn former hospital into treatment center

Proponents of putting a substance-abuse clinic in the soon-to-be-vacant St. Luke's Magic Valley Medical Center pitched their idea Tuesday to Twin Falls County commissioners. The county will take ownership of the building when St. Luke's moves to its new location off of Pole Line Road around May. It meanwhile is shopping the building around.

A proponent of another use — making it a Department of Veterans Affairs hospital — also voiced his opinion, noting later that it's too early to say if the two possibilities would be incompatible. John Southworth, a consultant, and former commissioner Bill Brockman suggested the building become a substance-abuse treatment center. The need is there, they said, but paying for it is a big question.

"I could fill it up tonight. Finding people isn't a problem," Southworth said of the 150-bed facility. "It is paying for it, which is the problem."

Commissioner Tom Mikesell suggested the pair come back with a business plan for funding the facility. Otherwise, the commissioners seemed generally receptive to the idea. Some funding ideas spit-balled by the treatment center's proponents included a 5 percent tax, or "user's fee," on all alcoholic beverages, and making the facility a private recovery center for wealthier people who would then subsidize the addicts who are closer to the streets. "I don't mind spending a nickel on a can of beer if I may need to use this treatment center at some point in my life," Brockman said.

Commission Chairman George Urie responded that the state would probably eye any additional money before it could trickle down to the county. Mikesell said the reality is that deciding on a new tenant, or tenants, for the building will largely depend on who can pay for it. "We all recognize the problem and we all recognize the issue and we all recognize the solution, and that is dollars," he said at the meeting.

Moving someone into the building is "an extremely important issue to the community," Mikesell said. The commission is organizing open houses to gather public opinion, he said. But he has an ideal candidate already in mind. "If I lived in a perfect world, and I don't, it would be the veterans (who get the building)," he said. "We have asked them to do a lot that we don't do, put their lives on the line, and we owe them more than a trip to Boise to see a doctor."

Bob Jackson, adjutant for Veterans of Foreign Wars and Disabled American Veterans, advocated the same position at the meeting. He said that although state VA officials have shot down the idea, their bosses can still be lobbied. He added that the VA is the only organization that's said the building isn't a great location, which he lambasted, saying it is already a hospital and wouldn't need major renovations to be a fit for the agency.