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Hospital board dissolved

By Mike Polhamus

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Teton County Commissioners Monday dissolved the Teton Valley Health Care's board of trustees in an effort to streamline decision-making and to temporarily place responsibility for hospital tax funds in the laps of elected officials. The resolution followed proceedings to re-appropriate county funds to the hospital in anticipation of future tax levy revenues, an emergency move providing \$600,000 immediately from the county and secured by the levy voters approved last week.

"In light of the fact that this board asked the taxpayers to approve tax money to fund the hospital," began Commission Chairman Larry Young, "and in light of the fact that the new administration has a plan which they need to expedite as quickly as possible, it is my position that it would be best for this board to dissolve the hospital board and assume direction of hospital governance directly.

"I haven't come to that position lightly," said Young. "I've done a lot of listening. What's the old saying – that desperate times call for desperate measures? I think we may be in such a situation."

"It's not an easy decision," said Commissioner Mark Trupp. "It's a very complex situation we're in... The reason I can begin to lean and support this is because I have defended the board and I continue to defend them, but we have thrown a huge amount of taxpayer dollars at this... I think that going this route we can hopefully show the taxpayers how their money's being managed, and if they don't like it they can vote us out."

Emphasizing that the motion to remove the hospital board is "in light of an emergency situation," commissioner Larry Young

expressed gratitude for the hospital board's past service. "This does not reflect on the performance of the board members or on the board as a whole," he said.

"The board is a group of volunteers who are in a high-pressure situation and get paid nothing," Young told those in attendance. "There are no words to thank the sitting hospital board enough for the way they've ridden through the past few years.

"The purpose of this move from my point of view was to put an end to recriminations and finger pointing, and 'who's to blame,'" Young said later. "We're pouring a lot of county treasure into the hospital to get them through this while. We felt that as elected officials we should be at the helm."

Former hospital board member Bill Reid expressed a hope that hospital politics would not overshadow the significance and objectives of the hospital itself. "I hope people don't get hung up on the small or petty issues," he said. "It's a grand endorsement of the county to take responsibility of the hospital, and I applaud them for that. With or without the current members of the board, the main objective is to have quality health care for Teton County, Idaho... Through all the meetings, we were finally able to alert the community how important funding the hospital is, and taking care of the hospital, and how important the hospital is to the community."

Legal Hurdles May Remain

State statute 31-3605 prohibits elimination of county hospital boards without voter approval. However, commissioners were advised by the county's attorney, Bart Birch, that the statute applies not to the removal of sitting board members, but to the removal of boards as a method of hospital governance.

All three commissioners accordingly appointed themselves to hospital board membership after the prior board's dissolution. Idaho requires at least five members for a county hospital board, meaning that its continuance hinges on appointing two additional board members with due haste. The legality of dissolving TVHC's previous board will depend on maintaining this continuity, because the decision was not submitted to public vote. "As of Friday, we had advice from our attorney that it was within our powers," Young said. "It is being looked into as we speak," he added Wednesday morning.

The county is now accepting applications for the next hospital board of trustees, which commissioners intend to reorganize after this interim period of direct oversight by them. The length of this period is not yet determined, and may depend on counsel provided Thursday by Birch. Invitations were extended to all hospital board members to reapply for board positions if they are still interested after this temporary respite, and applications will also be soon solicited from the public.



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