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Teton Valley Hospital board to meet

The newly appointed trustees group will discuss cuts to services.

The reality of Teton Valley Hospital's financial woes is about to hit home. The hospital's newly appointed board of trustees is set to meet Friday to discuss cuts to services, including its birthing program. Financial troubles at Teton Valley Hospital have been creeping up for years. This year's losses have been pegged at as much as \$2 million.

Teton County voters approved a bond in August that's aimed at keeping the hospital afloat -- it will deliver about \$1.4 million per year for two years -- but officials have warned that the money is not a permanent solution. "It basically buys the facility some extra time to implement some of the changes that need to be done," said Calvin Carey, the hospital's interim chief financial officer.

The previous board, which Teton County commissioners dismissed Aug. 11, voted to eliminate all deliveries of babies at the hospital, cut hospice care and restructure its home health agency. News of the cuts went out to the hospital's patrons in the form of letters.

That didn't go over well. Dozens of patrons protested the decision at the first meeting of the new board, which includes the three county commissioners. Most of the complaints focused on elimination of the birthing program, which accounts for a yearly net loss of about \$275,000.

In response to the complaints, board members formed a committee to examine the cuts prescribed by their predecessors. The idea is to weigh the value of services -- especially the birthing program -- to the community, against their cost to county taxpayers, commissioners said.

The Service Line Committee is scheduled to vote Thursday on a recommendation to the hospital board. On Friday, the new board is expected to decide whether to repeal or alter the previous board's decision.

"Especially when you're talking babies, you've got to look at (its effect) on the community," County Commissioner Mark Trupp said.

County Commissioner Alice Stevenson, who is on the Service Line Committee, said Tuesday she supported the decision to eliminate the birthing program. From a purely financial point of view, she said, it just doesn't make sense for the hospital to keep it going. "It was a decision none of us wanted to make," she said. "With all the information I have on hand at the moment, I still think it's a sad but necessary cut."

Board members haven't been the only casualties of the hospital's financial trouble. Former CEO Susan Kunz and Chief Financial Officer Alan Barnes resigned last year as losses spiraled out of control.

New CEO Floyd Bounds agreed that the birthing program, which has delivered about 50 babies annually in recent years, is not cost effective. "The expenses far outweigh the generated revenue," he said. If the hospital

board upholds elimination of the birthing program, Bounds said, expecting mothers would need to seek care at Madison Memorial Hospital in Rexburg or St. John's Medical Center in Jackson, Wyo.

Even if the birthing program is cut, prenatal care, including lab testing and ultrasound services, would remain at Teton Valley Hospital. But Stevenson said there is concern that a cut to existing services could translate into a loss of patrons in other areas.

At least one woman warned, "If they can't deliver their babies here, they will take all of their services elsewhere," Stevenson said. "Obviously, that's the kind of domino effect repercussion that we need to take a look at."

If the hospital's finances don't stabilize, it could be closed or sold to a private investor. But Commissioner Trupp is confident that won't happen. "We've got some challenging times ahead, but yet, we're going to have a hospital," he said.