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Latest St. Luke's acquisition could be approved Sept. 27

St. Luke's Health System is surveying the Jerome community to see how residents feel about a plan to merge St. Luke's with St. Benedict's Family Medical Center. But the move could be approved Sept. 27 when the St. Luke's board of directors meets in Boise.

The merger has already received several letters of support, including from St. Benedict's physicians and Jerome City Council and St. Luke's Magic Valley.

St. Luke's Health System President and CEO David Pate said if the merger were approved, the board would also decide the hospital's new name, likely to be St. Luke's Jerome. The systems would merge October 1.

St. Benedict's announced August 25 that it had approached St. Luke's about a merger. On Sept. 22, about 75 people attended a public meeting to hear more about the proposal. The 25-bed St. Benedict's is a subsidiary corporation of Essentia Community Hospitals and Clinics in Duluth, Minn. Essentia in 2010 adopted a new model of health care delivery, aligning clinics and smaller hospitals with larger, regional "hub" hospitals and facilities.

The closest Essentia facility to St. Ben's- as the hospital is known locally- is in northern Idaho. Other Essentia hubs are in Minnesota.

St. Benedict's President Jess Hawley said the Jerome facility was "out of sight, out of mind," from the rest of the Essentia system, making it difficult to operate as part of that system. Integrating with St. Luke's would provide the community with advantages such as new treatment technologies and specialists, said St. Benedict's Chief Medical Officer Betty Sugden.

St. Luke's is spending \$100 million to update its electronic records, a move that Pate said should help control costs and keep patients better informed.

Nobody at the meeting Sept. 22 protested the merger.

"My husband...needs a lot of care and I'm concerned for him and how the change could affect his ongoing treatments," said resident Betty Hyder. But she said she left the meeting feeling the move would be "OK for the community."

If the merger succeeds, St. Luke's Magic Valley Medical Center CEO Jim Angle will take over chief executive duties of the Jerome facility.