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Twin Falls health trust sets dates to pass out grants

A Twin Falls County board tasked with funding health projects with an eventual \$20 million from a hospital sale is now as little as two weeks away from passing out its first grants. At a meeting of the Twin Falls Health Initiatives Trust on Thursday evening, members sorted out the final process they will use to score 21 different grant proposals submitted by health care providers, educational institutions and others in the community.

In all, the organizations asked for nearly \$1.43 million in grant funding, more than double the \$661,000 board members say is available this year. The proposals have already been scored by an impartial, five-person panel made up of other community members, a group board Chairman Curtis Eaton thanked during the meeting for paving the way for the board. The board members will incorporate that panel's suggestions into their final rankings, they said. The board will make its final decision at a meeting planned for Dec. 2.

The board was prepared to begin discussing the applications Thursday night, but members realized they had not fully worked out the process. "If we did something tonight, I would just sit back and watch," said new member Rene LeBlanc, the only board member who did not receive a copy of the applications in advance.

The money was set aside during the 2006 sale of then-Magic Valley Regional Medical Center. Grant money comes from the interest earned on the full sum. The grants must be used to improve health care and related issues in the county.

The board could have provided as much as \$985,000 for grant funding once interest from 2007 is included. But the extra sum will be saved for the next year, Eaton said, noting that members agreed to publish the \$661,000 figure. Grant money could be sent out by the second week of December. An exact date is still being worked out.

Also Thursday, the board's attorney, Tom Robertson, walked members through a conflict-of-interest policy laid out in bylaws. Any members with a direct interest in a grant application are required to abstain from discussion and voting on that application and leave the room during those actions, he said.

Seven of the nine board members present Thursday night reported conflicts with a couple applications each. Examples ranged from Patty Kleinkopf, who works for applicant Family Health Services, to Terry McCurdy, who owns Magic Valley Business Systems and said he would abstain from two applications that would use the money to buy copy machines.

The board also heard from representatives of the county and Wells Fargo Bank, who laid out how the grant money will be transferred out and back in to a state investment pool. Since Twin Falls County deposited the money, it must be returned to the county's Wells Fargo account first before being moved to a new account set up for the trust, officials said. What remains after the disbursements will be quickly moved back to the investment pool to maximize interest. The presentation was meant to ensure all board members understood the process, the first time many have been asked to handle that much public money. A couple seemed more comfortable with the process. "It's only \$16 million," County Commissioner and ex-officio board member Tom Mikesell joked after the vote.