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Shore Health endorses Easton site

Selection of area for new hospital near community center not final

By **STEVE NERY**
News Editor

EASTON — The Shore Health System Board of Directors voted unanimously Wednesday to endorse a new strategic plan that includes locating a new regional medical center on land offered by the Talbot County Council next to the Talbot County Community Center, just north of Easton.

SHS Board Chairman John Dillon said Thursday the board needs to consider several issues before the selection becomes final, but believes the site is the right one. The hospital site comprises one part of a distributed health care network, which also includes four new or expanded health care sites in Queen Anne's and Caroline counties and enhanced outpatient services at Dorchester General Hospital in Cambridge.

SHS, an affiliate of the University of Maryland Medical System, began a strategic planning process in early 2007. The end result calls for a free-standing emergency room as well as specialty care and ambulatory services in Grasonville and ambulatory care



PHOTO BY ROXANE DOSTER WATTS

John Dillon, left, chairman of the Board of Directors for Shore Health System and Joseph P. Ross, president and CEO of Shore Health System spoke with members of the editorial board of *The Star Democrat* on Thursday.

and physician offices in Centreville and the northern and southern areas of Caroline County.

SHS expects to build a 400,000-square-foot hospital with 187 beds and spend as much as \$500 million for new facilities in the region. SHS President and CEO Joseph P. Ross said SHS has not determined the fate of the existing Memorial Hospital at Easton at 219 S. Washington St., but it could be used for educating health industry workers

or possibly still house health care services.

SHS' long-term plan also involves recruiting more physicians, a major reason SHS decided to align itself with UMMS.

The board had been considering a 229.5-acre site at the southeast corner

SITE

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of the state Route 404/ U.S. Route 50 intersection in addition to the 257 acres offered by the Talbot County Council. The board decided Wednesday to maintain its option agreement on the northern site, but to suspend any further action on it.

To arrive at its decision, the planning committee studied regional health care needs using data projected through 2030. The favored site offers several advantages, Ross said, including that the infrastructure is mostly in place, that work could start sooner, that the hospital could be built in phases because of its proximity to the existing hospital, and that physicians have already invested significantly in the town of Easton.

"I'm very optimistic that we're going to take health care on the Mid-Shore to a different level," Dillon said, adding he hopes the site gets final approval by early 2009.

Before making the decision final, SHS plans to evaluate the site's adjacency to the Easton Airport, confirm that there are no severe engineering challenges or obstacles to construction, get assurances that improved highway access to the site will be available, gauge philanthropic support and assess the likelihood of securing a certificate of need from the state. Ross said groundbreaking likely won't take place until 2012 or 2013.

"We know we've made the right decision," Dillon said. The UMMS board is in complete agreement with SHS' plans, he said, something which new UMMS Board of Directors Chairman Robert Chrencik affirmed in a statement.

"SHS' strategic planning process serves as a model of how to do planning correctly. The planning committee represented a balance of board members, physicians and administrators who worked for two years to arrive at a set of recommendations that are responsive to the region's future health needs. When we partnered with SHS two-and-a-half years ago, we knew that we had aligned with a health system that was highly proficient in serving the health care needs of its largely rural region. The quality of their strategic planning process has further confirmed our respect," Chrencik said.

Ross said SHS especially appreciat-

ed the county and town's willingness to expedite the process to get the land zoned properly and make available the necessary infrastructure. In addition to providing some of the land for free, the county has agreed to pay to extend water and sewer to the property line.

Gov. Martin O'Malley praised the decision to stay close to town.

"I am pleased that Memorial Hospital at Easton will be staying in the town of Easton," O'Malley said in a statement. "The hospital's decision to stay in Easton demonstrates its commitment to smart and sustainable growth principles by keeping our existing communities strong and deciding against moving the hospital to a rural area. After discussions with the town of Easton, Talbot County, and the University of Maryland Medical System, it is clear that all parties were striving for an outcome that is consistent with smart growth and the desires of the community."

Talbot County officials, who had been concerned about what a move up north would mean to the local economy as well as to local health care, were pleased with the board's decision.

"Christmas came early for the people of Talbot County," Talbot County Council President Philip Carey Foster said. "I think, frankly, being near a municipality offers so many more benefits that this was really the soundest and wisest choice for the future of the hospital."

Maryland Comptroller Peter Franchot commended the board for making a decision that will bring better health care to the region as well as the Easton Town Council and Talbot County Council for working to ensure the hospital stayed in Easton.

"It's a terrific day for the people of Talbot County and the entire Mid-Shore," Franchot said. "I think it's ideally positioned to meet the health care needs of a growing region; also a region that's growing older."

"It's appropriate because Easton is a hub for the whole Mid-Shore, so the whole Mid-Shore really shares in the victory," Franchot added.

Talbot County Councilman Levin F. "Buddy" Harrison IV recalled addressing the hospital's future as far back as during the 2006 election campaign.

"It is a big relief," Harrison said. "I was starting to get a little bit con-

cerned, especially after the option was taken on the north county site."

"I feel like whatever the details are that need to be ironed out, all parties involved will certainly iron them out," Harrison added.

Talbot County Council Thomas G. Duncan said the next step will be knowing with certainty the hospital will be built by the community center.

"It's been a long journey," Duncan said. "I guess we'll end the journey when they say for sure this is where it's going to go."

Easton Mayor Robert Willey said he doesn't anticipate any problems with the zoning being made available, as the town, county and SHS all signed onto a memorandum of understanding.

"There's a lot of credit to go around for getting to this point," Easton Town Council President John Ford said, thanking the town and county staffs and Duncan in particular. People should be appreciative of fact that the hospital board stuck to its plan and made its decision within the timeline, he said.

"The spirit of cooperation is there on both sides, I think," Ford said.

Talbot County Councilman Dirck K. Bartlett said he's encouraged by the move, but looks forward to hearing that UMMS has approved the site.

"It's great, it's wonderful, but it's not done," he said.

State Sen. Richard Colburn, R-37-Mid-Shore, who also works as town manager of Federalsburg, said he looks at the decision "as a sweet victory for all concerned," as health care access will also be improved in areas far away from the hospital.

"I think this will please the vast majority," Colburn said. "I don't see any hurdles that we can't get over."

Colburn, who traveled with Duncan from town to town to get their local governments' support of keeping the hospital in Easton, said now is the time for the state, county, town and SHS/UMMS to come together to make the relocation happen. He had urged for a decision to be made as soon as it could be because of the controversy and anxiety over the relocation, he said.

Franchot agreed that whatever the challenges are in building the hospital at the favored site, they can be met.

"Any vibrant community in the U.S. would give their right arm to have a health care facility like Memorial Hospital," he said.