

The public's interest in understanding the future direction of Shore Health System and Memorial Hospital in Easton is a reflection of the great esteem, importance and value which this community places on its principal health care provider.

As chairman of the health system's Board of Directors and as a long-time resident of Talbot County, I deeply appreciate the community's endorsement and concern for the future and I recognize our responsibility to fulfill the community's trust. When complicated issues must be addressed, such as discussing the future direction of the hospital and health system, the result should be clarity, not confusion. For that reason, I offer the following explanation about how the Board of Shore Health System is planning for the future.

In late January, the board approved a vision statement and initiated a planning process, which during the next 12 to 18 months, will result in a recommendation about how best to deliver health care to the Mid-Shore in the decade ahead and beyond. We envision a future in which even the most complex medical needs of our community can largely be served locally, rather than requiring a trip to Baltimore, Washington, or elsewhere.

To accomplish this goal, we must succeed in attracting more physicians and more physician specialists to our region, and to achieve this objective, we must do two things:

1) offer physicians state-of-the-art medical facilities with sophisticated technology and clinical resources; and

2) deliver to these physicians a regional population large enough to make efficient use of their highly specialized services.

I emphasize the word regional because I am not sure the true character of Memorial Hospital is fully understood. Currently, 62 percent of inpatients at Memorial Hospital reside outside of Talbot County; 56 percent of emergency room and urgent care

patients come from outside of Talbot County.

These facts validate our belief that despite the perception of some that Memorial Hospital largely serves a localized population, the facts about who we serve demand that we meet the needs of all Mid-Shore residents equally. To do anything less would be an abandonment of our long-standing mission as a regional health care provider.

To accomplish our goal as a regional health care provider, we anticipate an ambitious facilities expansion across the region: a new medical office building and renovated emergency room at Dorchester General Hospital, expanded medical and diagnostic offices in Centreville and Denton, a new Emergency Department at Memorial Hospital in late 2007, to be followed by expanded outpatient services in 2008; an acute inpatient rehabilitation center at Memorial Hospital this spring; and, yes, the possibility of an additional regional medical campus in the coming decade.

It is this last possibility that has generated some confusion and controversy. Let me address this issue specifically.

First, no decisions about an additional medical campus have been made, other than the decision to engage in a thorough planning process.

Second, under any future scenario, the board has stated its clear intention to retain a vital mix of clinical services at the current Memorial Hospital, including emergency services. The planning process in the months ahead will help us develop a clear vision of what those services would be.

Third, we intend to exercise our stewardship responsibilities as a board by comparing multiple models of health care delivery. This will require us to place an option on a potential site (or sites) so that we might study the site's suitability to host a medical campus.

Sites for board consideration will include the current hospital, although limited opportunities for land expansion and improved highway access make this possibility extremely challenging. The

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farm land we own on the Easton bypass at Oxford Road also will be included for consideration, as well as sites in northern Talbot County, although no agreement has been reached on any particular sites to study in that area.

Our ultimate choice for an expanded medical campus — a decision, I must note, that lies years ahead — will be based on the location's ability to successfully serve a regional population, adequately accommodate a complex medical campus, and offer opportunities for future expansion.

Health care is ever-changing. As a board entrusted to protect and advance this region's most valued health care resource, we have an obligation to face the realities of the future.

If we do not explore and plan for the changes affecting our future, our health system will decline.

Our finances will deteriorate. Our services will shrink, not expand. Our ability to attract and retain the best physicians will be diminished, not improved.

Our access to new medical technology will decline. Talbot residents as well as others in the region then will be forced to seek ever more of their health care services out of the area and across the Bay. The region's need for improved and expanded health care will go unfulfilled.

The Board of Directors of Shore Health System fully understands and values our commitment and responsibilities to the citizens of Easton and Talbot County.

We understand and value our commitment and responsibilities to the citizens of Caroline, Queen Anne's, Dorchester and Kent counties as well.

As we explore our future in the months and years ahead, we will develop a plan that meets the health care needs of all citizens who call our Mid-Shore home.

*John Dillon is chairman of the Shore Health System Board of Directors. Shore Health System operates Memorial Hospital at Easton and Dorchester General Hospital in Cambridge.*