

Guest Comment by Margaret Welch

Ross' letter to hospital donors raises many questions

By MARGARET WELCH
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The CEO of Shore Health System, Joseph Ross, has written a letter, apparently going to everyone who has given money to the hospital in recent years, in which he expresses a need to explain the planning process for determining the location of the new regional medical center that SHS has decided to build. He says "there has been considerable comment in the local media" about that process and thought donors would appreciate hearing about it from him directly.

Indeed, that is desirable, and one wonders why it has taken so long for the folks at Shore Health System to recognize that need. Now that we have heard more details, however, many questions remain.

For starters, he says the process is not designed to produce a decision regarding the site for the new hospital until the fall of 2008! That is at least a full two years from the time when SHS embarked on this process. That is an extraordinarily extended process, especially for a business that claims justifiably that it is experiencing competitive pressures from other medical providers in the region (primarily, Anne Arundel Medical Center).

Ross's letter adds that regulatory approvals for the site selected will require at least another year thereafter. However, those approvals would likely take far longer if SHS and its parent University of Maryland Medical System (UMMS) choose a site at the far northern border of Talbot County, which they are apparently considering quite seriously, instead of one that is in or near Easton, as they are being urged by all local officials and a large number of citizens to do.

The reason those regulatory approvals could take a long time is simple. The Talbot County Council has offered a site for the new facility just north of Easton, as well as utility hookups to town water and sewage, at no cost. If SHS/UMMS ultimately reject that offer and then come back later to the county council for zoning approvals to build on a site in the middle of the cornfields at the intersection of Route 50 and Highway 404, what do they think the reaction will be?

Indeed, the process described in Ross' letter seems oddly oblivious to the fact that the site(s) being considered that are not close to Easton are going to be non-starters for the local zoning authorities and a majority of Talbot citizens. And it is not just because of selfish or provincial interest, as some advocates of SHS have unfairly suggested. Building a huge new hospital at the 50/404 intersection, which is devoid of the required infrastructure and already afflicted with major traffic congestion, flies in the face of the smart growth principles in Maryland law and land-use policy.

It also would be contrary to common sense. Ross emphasizes that regional needs must be considered to recruit doctors and attract new medical specialists. But he does not explain how that factor works in favor of the 50/404 location? Easton is the Mid-Shore's cultural and economic center. Even in its present location in downtown Easton the hospital gets more than 60 percent of its patients from outside Talbot County.

What seems clear is that if Shore Health System and UMMS build a first-class regional hospital on the northern edge of Easton, it will get more than its share of patients from the relevant

area and will have a much better chance of attracting good medical talent than a hospital built in the middle of nowhere.

Those and numerous other questions jump out at the reader of Ross' letter to former donors. One would expect that those who have provided such outstanding support to the hospital in the past deserve a better explanation than they have been given so far as to where this process is going and why the northern location is worthy of consideration given all its disadvantages.

Margaret Welch writes from Easton.