

Talbot, Memorial Hospital talk about site

County's land offer topic of closed-door meeting

By STEVE NERY
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May 16, 2007 **EASTON** —The Talbot County Council and Shore Health System representatives met behind closed doors Tuesday morning in the first of a series of meetings to discuss the county's offer of 90 acres of land for a new hospital.

Fearing a new hospital might be built away from Easton, the council in March offered 90 acres next to the Talbot County Community Center to Shore Health System (SHS), also proposing to make water and sewer lines available to the property line at no cost to the hospital. SHS President and CEO Joseph Ross wrote back in April, proposing a series of private meetings.

Ross, SHS attorney John Murray and Jeffrey Johnson, the senior vice president of system development and external operations, met for about an hour-and-a-half with Councilmen Thomas Duncan, Dirck Bartlett and Peter Carroll, as well as County Manager Andy Hollis, County Attorney Michael Pullen and County Secretary Jessica Morris. Councilman Philip Carey Foster decided not to attend the meeting, while Councilman Levin "Buddy" Harrison IV planned to attend, but was unable to do so.

Besides the offer itself, Bartlett said, the two sides discussed the basic needs of the hospital moving forward and what hospital officials are looking for in a site. It's important to understand what SHS wants so the council can try to accommodate that, he said.

Bartlett said he was encouraged to know Shore Health System officials were willing to take time to speak about the offer.

"That's a good sign," he said. "If they weren't considering it, they wouldn't be sitting at the table."

Bartlett said the council will continue to meet with Shore Health System officials and focus on being active rather than reactive.

"I think it's a viable option for them," he said. "They were somewhat enthusiastic about the possibility. I considered it a good, constructive meeting."

Carroll called the session a "very good first meeting so we can begin the process of working together to see the hospital winds up at the county proposed site."

Another meeting is to take place in early June, he said. Ideally, county, hospital and town staff members ultimately will wind up working on particular issues such as zoning, water and sewer and transportation, he said.

Carroll said he was looking forward to working with the town to see that it all happens seamlessly. County Attorney Pullen and Easton Town Attorney Christopher Kehoe have been talking, he said, and the two sides will likely get together in the near future. Recently, however, the proposed county budget has been “all-consuming.”

Foster, meanwhile, said there needs to be at least one member of the council who “doesn’t have their hands tied” because of information exchanged in private. He said he can understand closed meetings for the purpose of negotiating a real estate issue, but the county has already made its offer to SHS.

“I’m concerned the hospital is taking the issue out of the public sphere and I don’t frankly think that’s very healthy at this juncture,” Foster said.

These issues are best discussed in public at an early stage to clear up misconceptions, he added.

In April, Ross wrote that SHS will consider other sites inside Talbot County as well as the county’s offer. Patti Willis, the vice president of corporate communications, said at the time the hospital board of directors had indicated they want the new hospital built inside Talbot County.

During the private meetings, Ross wrote to the council, Shore Health System would “seek to secure additional information and to clarify aspects of your proposal, for the purpose of bringing it to the Shore Health System Planning Committee for review.”

The first meeting, he wrote, was to center on the process for moving forward, who would participate in future meetings and what, if any, of the discussions would be made public.

The second meeting would focus on “issues such as ownership, financing, zoning and infrastructure, including water, sewer, roads, utilities and pedestrian flow,” Ross wrote. The meeting also would involve discussion about the site in relation to expansion plans for the Easton Airport and any problems that might arise because of proximity to the airport.

Subsequent meetings would provide the opportunity for Shore Health System advisors and county professional and technical staffs to discuss the issues and explore possible solutions, Ross wrote. The two parties could begin the process of developing a term sheet leading towards an “option document.”

The option would allow Shore Health System to study the land while protecting its interests, Willis said.