

Groups study future of hospital

By Sandra Armbruster
staff writer

The fate of Wayne County General Hospital — and the thousands of people who use its facilities — may well lie in the hands of several groups now studying its future.

A new group of local government officials last week began studying operating alternatives for the hospital at Michigan and Merriman roads in Westland.

Called the health and human services liaison committee, it is composed of mayors and supervisors from out-county areas who were appointed by County Executive William Lucas. Among its responsibilities is the study of Wayne

County General. Casting importance on the study was a statement by Lucas shortly after he took office that the hospital may have to be closed or sold due to its deficit operation.

LIAISON committee member Charles Pickering, mayor of Westland, said that at last week's meeting Lucas made clear that he doesn't want to close the hospital.

"But if there aren't concessions (from employee groups), there will have to be a look at other operating alternatives," Pickering said the committee was told.

He added that he was concerned that the board of commissioners hadn't acted on an independent report on hospital

operations that Lucas wants. At least one commissioner is cool to the idea of a new study.

"We've not even considered it. There have been a couple (many) studies," said Kay Beard, whose district includes Westland. "We're doing research on the number of studies that have been made to see whether the \$27,000 for a new study is warranted."

Meanwhile, the commission's own human services committee, on which Beard serves, began Wednesday to hear preliminary testimony in preparation for writing an ordinance to cover the hospital's operation. That ordinance is mandated by the county's new charter.

Expected to testify Wednesday were representatives from University Medical Affiliates, which contracts with the hospital to provide physicians' services, Comprehensive Health Planning Council (CHPC) of Southeast Michigan and the county board of institutions.

BEARD SAID she wants to keep an open mind on what direction the hospital should take. She added that she wants to see the hospital stay open, although its administration and management may need "tightening up."

Writing the ordinance, according to Beard, should be "done without speed to make sure it stands up in court, and yet speedy enough so that people will finally know what its operation will be."

Also considering the hospital an "integral part of the medical care system for Wayne County and particularly western Wayne County," is Terence Carroll, executive director of CHPC

which is responsible for planning health care delivery in the southeastern area of the state. Carroll explained his organization's position in a recent conversation with the Observer.

Despite recognition of the hospital's importance as a research and teaching hospital for the University of Michigan Medical School, Carroll said that during development of a plan to reduce excess hospital capacity in the area, Wayne County General was asked to reduce its number of available beds by 99 from a total of 388. Of the 99 beds to be reduced, 13 were in obstetrics, seven were in pediatrics and 79 in the medical/surgical area.

Bed reduction is a way health planners use to encourage cuts in the cost of health care by urging consolidation of hospital or health services where appropriate.

Carroll said that as of February, the hospital had a licensed capacity of 315 beds, reducing its medical/surgical beds by 68 and pediatric beds available by one.

The bed-cutting assignment given the hospital was a "pretty heavy" one according to Carroll.

"But we felt it was in accord with the formula used to assess occupancy and range of services," he said.

"We recognize that hospitals have different abilities to provide intensity of services for individuals with complex kinds of illness, when a variety of illnesses are present."

CARROLL SAID that CHPC isn't recommending that the hospital close but that the consolidation of services be "looked at and thoughtfully evaluated."

Red Cross handling Oakland food program

The American Red Cross, Southeastern Michigan Chapter, has assumed administrative responsibility for operation of the Pontiac-North Oakland Emergency Food Program.

The program involves free distribution of food to needy families in North Oakland County. It began when General Motors Corp. and United Auto Workers started a canned food drive among UAW workers which GM matched with corporate dollars.

Appointed by GM, United Way of Pontiac-North Oakland has been responsible for coordinating the project

with the help of the city of Pontiac. Except for accounting, all United Way responsibilities will now be performed by Red Cross.

According to United Way spokesman Gary McMullen, the transfer of its duties to Red Cross was a natural transition. "The American Red Cross is a direct service organization that has responded to emergency food needs through its disaster services for over a century."

Registration for the free food was held at the Pontiac Silverdome at the end of January.

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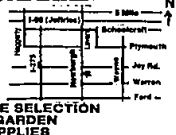
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