

Mercy Health Corp. eyes Westland Medical

By Teri Banas
staff writer

An organization which operates five Catholic hospitals in the metropolitan area is considering taking over the Westland Medical Center, which has had a history of financial problems as a county hospital and for the last two years as a private hospital.

The Board of Directors for the Mercy Health Corp. Friday will consider the purchase of a lease to operate the Westland Medical Center. The hospital, on Merriman Road near Michigan Avenue in Westland, was operated by Wayne County as Wayne County General Hospital until two years ago when the Southwest Detroit Hospital Corp. leased it from the county.

The action follows months of talks between the Farmington Hills-based Mercy Corp. and officers of Southwest Detroit, which for two years has attempted to turn around the beleaguered facility.

THE OBSERVER reported last week that negotiations between Southwest officials and three bidders had resulted in a tentative offer from Mercy Health Corp.

This week, a spokesman for the non-profit organization said officials are hopeful that if given the nod they could take over as soon as Jan. 1.

"There is no strong Catholic presence in southwest Wayne County and we'd be interested in that," said Mercy's LeRoy D. Fahle, chief executive officer at Mount Carmel Hospital, one of the five hospitals Mercy operates in southeast Michigan.

"It would provide us with an important access point. It would improve our ability to distribute our resources between Mount Carmel in Detroit and our Arthur McAuley Center in Ann Arbor."

FAHLE SAID negotiations for the center began in earnest last August and that so far board members have informally expressed enthusiasm for the project.

"I don't think we'll get any arguments that it's compatible with our mission to serve the economically disadvantaged," Fahle said. "The issue (will be) how quickly can it be improved to attract and retain an appropriate number of medical staff and patients."

Fahle noted that there is potential for population growth and the need for hospital facilities in Westland's area because of development of the I-275 corridor to the west, along the I-696 corridor to the north and

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— LeRoy D. Fahle,
chief executive officer
Mount Carmel Hospital

around Metropolitan Airport to the south.

But Westland must take steps to improve its patient occupancy rate. The 310-bed center under has a 28 percent occupancy rate. Last year, Southwest, which also runs the 244-bed Southwest Detroit Hospital in Detroit, listed \$2.6 million in losses for its operations.

WHEN WAYNE County operated it as Wayne County General, the hospital posted annual losses averaging \$15-\$18 million.

Mercy officials indicated that acquiring Westland would enable the Mercy chain to have fuller obstetrics services. "At one time Mount Carmel had the largest OB-GYN service in the state, but we moved out of it around 1972. We think in some respects that it had not been the wisest course to take."

Fahle said Westland has developing 60-bed psychiatric unit as a needed service that would help accommodate patients from throughout the Mercy system.

The Mercy administrator guessed his corporation will need to spend some \$7 million in the next four years to make improvements at Westland and to convert its four-bed rooms to two-bed rooms.

THE CORPORATION operates 21 hospitals in Michigan, Indiana, Iowa and New York. Mount Carmel is licensed for 587 beds in Detroit. The Mercy group also operates the McAuley Center in Ann Arbor, St. Joseph-Mercy Hospital in Pontiac, and Samaritan in Detroit.

The Mercy Health Corporation's annual report for 1985 listed its yearly income at more than \$1 billion. Each hospital is administered

by a local board.

Wayne County Commissioner Kay Beard, D-Inkster, whose district includes Garden City and Westland, opposed the leasing of the facility to Southwest Detroit two years ago but said she was pleased with the latest development.

There is still eight years remaining in a 10-year lease between the county and private hospital corporation. The hospital remains one of more than a dozen facilities in the Detroit area contracted to provide medical care for indigent persons.

BEARD SAID she hoped the transfer in ownership would provide Westland Medical with a financial shot in the arm, one that could help the center regain its status as a major trauma center.

Fahle said it may take years because of the costly "standby" expenses associated with such emergency service. Yet, he didn't rule it out.


Charles Arnold, a trustee at Southwest, said his board's concern is that "health care for low and moderately income people will be provided."

"The whole hospital industry is having its problems. It will take an entity that will provide patients. The crux of the issue is occupancy. Un-


fortunately, our marketing efforts have not enabled us to remedy that situation. There may be others who can."

Fahle credited Southwest for its


efforts to improve Westland Medical's service and financial operations and said it would be likely that future talks could develop between the two corporations over "cooperative ventures" within Detroit.



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