

# Administrators cite financial losses in quest for County General reins

Wayne County General Hospital officials want the Board of Commissioners to give them more operating control of the 340-bed hospital in Westland.

The hospital administration and the Board of County Institutions want authority to negotiate union contracts, determine personnel policies and control all purchasing.

Hospital contracts are now negotiated by the Labor Relations Board, an arm of the Board of Commissioners. Personnel policies are determined by the Civil Service Commission, and the Board of Auditors oversees purchasing.

The Board of County Institutions is the governing board of the hospital. County General's budget — \$59.4 million this year — is set by the Board of Auditors and Board of Commissioners.

GEORGE CROSS, the county's chief lawyer, said it's doubtful the board of institutions could be given more control over the hospital without the board's being changed to an independent authority separate from general county government. Such a change would require the state law creating the board of institutions to be changed.

County General, the only publicly owned hospital in Wayne County, has repeatedly lost money. Last year's operating deficit was \$6.5 million, according to the administration. This year's deficit is expected to be \$6 million.

Hospital officials say they could reduce the deficit and operate the hospital more efficiently if they were freed from the county's "maze of bureaucratic red tape."

The county board's Human Resources Committee last week endorsed the so-called autonomy request "in concept" and asked the board of institutions to provide the details.

THE MOVE FOR autonomy is the hospital administrators' response to a county board-authorized study that recommends County General be sold, via a lease/purchase agreement, to any interested private hospital group in the out-county area. Such a

sale would also require the Michigan Legislature's approval.

The recommendation, made last fall by the Greater Detroit Area Hospital Council (GDAHC) as part of a \$25,000 study, was referred to the board of institutions, which strongly opposes it.

GDAHC Executive Director Symond Gottlieb called the referral "delaying tactics" by the commissioners but said his group's recommendation is not dead.

"Obviously, the political process is in the works," said Gottlieb who attended the committee meeting.

"I would guess a big part of it is the concern of the employees and the unions. There's almost no place else where they would get the same level of salary and benefits."

The other major issue over control of County General is care of indigent patients — those who have no medical insurance. According to hospital officials, 24 percent of County General's clinic patients and 13 percent of admitted patients aren't covered by insurance.

GOTTLIEB SAYS the county is not obliged to provide care for indigents through its own hospital and could purchase care for less money from private hospitals.

Hospital administrators and the board of institutions disagree. They maintain the cost of indigent care would increase if the county paid private hospital providers. And they doubt the amount of care County General provides the poor would be maintained.

"The special needs of the kinds of patients seen at Wayne County General are not now being met by the general hospital community," states a hospital response to the GDAHC report.

What to do with the hospital, first established in 1832 as the "Wayne County Poor House," has been at issue before the county board for years.

Gottlieb said studies recommending changes at the hospital date back to 1953.

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