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Lee Memorial wants grip on Bonita clinic

To offer NCH \$1 for its half, assume debt

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The Lee Memorial Health System directors Thursday voted to send NCH Healthcare System a formal offer that would give Lee Memorial full control of the jointly owned Bonita Community Health Center.

Their pitch to Naples: Sell us your share for a dollar and we'll take over its remaining construction debt and assume responsibility for what right now is a money-losing operation.

No one from NCH attended the Lee board's meeting. Dr. C.B. Rebsamen, the chief medical officer for ambulatory and strategic services, will contact administrators there shortly to hear what they think of the offer and see if they want

to pitch other ideas.

If the two sides can't reach agreement, they'll go into third-party arbitration. The Bonita Community Health Center board, made up of representatives from both systems, will have to vote on a proposal if one emerges. Its next meeting is May 1.

Bonita Community Health Center - consisting of doctors' offices, diagnostics, urgent care and outpatient services - was developed jointly a decade ago as a way of bringing medical care to the Bonita and Estero market without creating a turf war between the two systems.

But for a number of reasons, patient volume and revenue has not met expectations and the two health systems will likely have to start pumping money into the center by this summer. Lee Memorial believes single ownership will improve the center's prospects, largely because a hospital-owned outpatient center commands higher Medicare reimbursement than a joint venture - even if the partners are both nonprofit hospitals.

The Lee board also heard the administration's financial projections for a freestanding emergency room to be added to Bonita Community Health Center, assuming NCH agrees to end the partnership.

Previously, they had indicated they supported the concept, and after seeing the financial projections, members in attendance voted unanimously to move forward with the planning, authorizing \$500,000 to start the process. A formal vote will be taken at the full board meeting next week.

"I'm very pleased," said Sam Levy, an Estero resident and part of a group of Estero and Bonita community leaders who have been pushing for the development of an emergency room as a precursor to their dream - a hospital in south Lee.

Levy said residents are supportive of both hospital systems.

"We just want quality health care in south Lee County," he said.

Emergency physician Dr. Larry Hobbs told The News-Press previously that the board has every right to explore opportunities but he was concerned there won't be enough doctors willing to take emergency room call and that the year-round population in Bonita and Estero isn't big enough to support a 24-7 emergency room.

Hobbs' practice runs an urgent-care clinic in Estero in addition to the emergency department at Gulf Coast Medical Center and he said business is slow in summer months.

Lee Memorial administrators believe the ER has a big enough population base and will turn a profit. By their calculations, they will turn about \$1.9 million in the first year and \$2.6 million by year five.

The money will help offset the rest of the center's losses, Rebsamen said.

Lee Memorial will also gain overall market share - right now, Collier County hospitals get 72 percent of ER patients from south Lee County and 67 percent of patients admitted to the hospital via the ER. Lee Memorial officials project that a freestanding emergency room in the Bonita area will capture 75 percent of the patients who now go to Collier hospitals.

Lee Memorial would have to spend \$4 million to convert space within Bonita Community Health Center to an emergency room. If a deal can't be reached with NCH, Lee Memorial may explore developing it at another site. It owns 26 acres adjacent to the health center.

As for a freestanding birth center - another proposal - Lee Memorial officials said they realized the Bonita area isn't the right place. There are no obstetricians and few mothers coming from that area.

What's more, obstetricians want to make sure they can get a mother or baby in distress to a hospital within 30 minutes if they need to perform an emergency Cesarean section.

The system, in the future, may look into a birth center to relieve pressure on its hospitals, but administrators will look elsewhere in the county.
