

Mackinac Straits Hospital Seeks County's Support, Responds to 'Communication Gap' Concern

By Amy Polk

Mackinac Straits Hospital Authority is seeking Mackinac County Board of Commissioners endorsement and understanding of its transition to a private, non-profit corporation called Mackinac Straits Health Systems. The transition, said the hospital authority, is necessary to qualify the hospital for \$37 million in United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development financing.

Voters in Brevort, Moran, and St. Ignace townships and in the City of St. Ignace will be asked to approve the transition to the private corporation May 6. The election is open to only those four municipalities because they are the four that created the hospital authority.

All Mackinac County taxpayers, however, pay a hospital millage that is expected to pump

\$950,000 into hospital operations this year. The hospital authority says the millage supports the hospital's long term care facility, which has been losing money.

Mackinac Straits Hospital Authority Chair Ron Mitchell said at a hospital board meeting Monday afternoon, March 24, he does not understand complaints from the Mackinac County Board of Commissioners that they have been left in the dark about the transfer of assets to a new hospital to be built near the county airport.

Lack of communication on both sides has led to a growing rift between the two boards. The county commission met Monday morning to discuss its concerns with attorneys, but there was no representation from the hospital. Likewise, there was no representation from the county board at the hospital board's meeting that after-

noon.

Commenting on news reports of the county's concerns, Mr. Mitchell told his board, "I don't think the county is against this, but I don't think they are really in it as they should be. We're going to go back to the county, I guess, and try to get an endorsement from them that says, 'Yeah, we realize that this is a good deal.' I just can't imagine that they would not be all for this. We've made an effort on the part of the employees to make sure that nobody loses their job. We've made sure that they have the same retirement that they have in our current facility, and we really have tried to do that. [The vote] needs to pass, and it will pass. But it needs to pass overwhelmingly, I think. I think this county needs to step up and show support for the effort that's been here, and the opportunity for us to have this facility.

Citing earlier county board complaints that the Hospital Authority is not keeping the county informed enough of its activities, Chairman Ron Mitchell and Richard Smith attended a March 13 Mackinac County commission meeting, where Mr. Mitchell said the pair responded to the county concerns.

"We met with the county, probably as a result of an article in [*The St. Ignace News*] where they had said that we don't talk to them and let them know what's going on," Mr. Mitchell said.

He responded to the county's three concerns, including lack of information, the disposition of the current hospital building once the hospital moves into a new building, and the 1.2 mills to subsidize hospital operations.

Mr. Mitchell said the county receives all the hospital board's minutes and reprints of financial reports. About a year ago, he said, commissioners requested these materials not be included in their meeting packets because the packets already contained too much stuff, although the clerk still receives the information.

"I don't know what more we can do, but it does come out in the paper where it looks like we're trying to avoid them," Mr. Mitchell said, noting he is unsure of the county's role in the matter. "But for them to say that they had not been informed, I guess if I was a county commissioner, I'd be embarrassed to make that statement that I wasn't informed, because they have been, so it's their choice whether or not they want to look at it, but I think we've made the effort."

Addressing the county's second concern about what becomes of the old hospital building on Burdette Street when the hospital moves out, Mr. Mitchell said he has talked to the county commission about forming a committee to work on this. Scheduling conflicts have prevented them from setting up a meeting, and County Commission Chair Dawn Nelson reportedly told the authority she wanted to wait until after the March 24 meeting.

"It comes out in the paper where it looks like our committee is trying to decide what to do with the building, but the building is really the responsibility of the county that owes the \$1.3 million on it," Mr. Mitchell said. "I think we've felt we have a moral obligation to take care of that and stay with it, but from what I got [at the county meeting] was that it's kind of their business. I'm almost at the point where I think we should just send them a letter saying we're leaving in the spring of 2010, and here's your building back, and we're not going to make anymore payments, but I don't want to make it that hard of a line."

Addressing the county's third concern about the 1.2 mill county millage that is levied county-wide and raises \$950,000 for hospital operations, Mr. Mitchell said the millage raises money "mostly" to operate the long term care unit for the benefit of the county.

"The county has a health service agreement with us to provide those health care services, and that's their way of paying for it. Ultimately it's their decision whether or not to make that payment, or to let us continue to collect that millage, but I don't know what the options are. I guess the options I see for them are, either they do it this way or they take over long term care."

Hospital authority Vice Chair Richard Smith added that, last year, the acute care department made \$530,838, while the long term care department lost \$396,747.

"A lot of people don't realize that all of the money from that millage goes to long term care," Mr. Smith said. "Without that millage, we would not be able to run long term care."

Long term care costs \$1.10 million annually, Mr. Smith said, and the millage only pays \$950,000 of that.

Mr. Mitchell said again he does not understand why the county appears not to be supporting the hospital, or what the county expects from the hospital authority.

"I would have thought that we would have a lot more support from them. This is a win-win thing for this area," he said. "I don't know how it could be any better. We're going to have a \$25 million hospital that is not going to be the responsibility of the taxpayers from Mackinac County. USDA has guaranteed the loan to a private funding corporation, so [the corporation] is going to take the hit for it," if something does go wrong.

Mr. Mitchell called the involvement of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians and Mackinac Island "a good thing," and said he appreciates supportive statements from St. Ignace city administrators, who told him they would do "whatever they need to do" to support the project.

Reporting on the Mackinac County Board of Commissioners meeting she attended that morning, area resident Sally Hazen urged cooperation and communi-

cation.

"This is not just important to the county," she said. "This is really important to us."

Mrs. Hazen said she attended the meeting because she read newspaper articles and her husband uses the facility often. She blamed miscommunication and the county's legal advice for any "combative attitude" from the county board, and said attorneys are telling commissioners they should be concerned, misinforming them the hospital authority is deciding what to do with the old hospital building without consulting the county board.

She is worried that the hospital authority will be perceived as doing something behind the county's back.

"I can assure you they all want this," Mrs. Hazen said of the hospital project. "What has happened is . . . instead of coming to you and asking directly, they called lawyers."

She said the county's attorneys misinformed the county board that the hospital authority thinks it owns the Burdette Street hospital building.

"I assured them that, no you didn't think that at all," she said.

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Michigan Politics

By George Weeks



Democratic Congressman Bart Stupak Dubbed 'Ideological Center' of House

On Capitol Hill, northern Michigan tilts well to the right among Republicans and to the center among Democrats.

First District Representative Bart Stupak of Menominee had the least liberal 2007 voting record of any of the six Democrats in the Michigan congressional delegation, according to the *National Journal's* recently-published composite scores on 109 economic, social, and foreign issues.

Mr. Stupak, who last week announced his bid for a ninth term, had a liberal score of 58.3%, prompting the *Journal* to list him among those at the "ideological center" of the House. In contrast, Representative John Conyers (D-Detroit), with a 95% liberal score, led not only the Michigan delegation; he was among seven members tied for first as the most liberal in the entire House.

(In 1981, Senator Carl Levin was pegged most liberal in the Senate, with a score of 94%. Now, at 76.5%, he's ranked 26th. Senator Debbie Stabenow, at 82.8, is 16th.)

While Mr. Stupak bucks liberal orthodoxy among Democrats, eight-term 2nd District Representative Pete Hoekstra of Holland and nine-term 4th District Representative Dave Camp of Midland are in stride with the GOP's conservative tide.

Mr. Hoekstra's 80 was the highest conservative rating among Michigan's nine Republicans. Mr. Camp was third at 78.

After their many terms and committee leadership positions in Congress, the Northern Three have considered, or have been prominently mentioned, as potential candidates for statewide office: Mr. Stupak years ago for attorney general and as a prospective running mate with now-Governor Jennifer Granholm, and now maybe as a statewide candidate in 2010; Mr. Hoekstra for the Senate or governor; Mr. Camp for the Senate.

Mr. Camp, who has a good shot at becoming the ranking Republican on the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, is not in the current media-mention mix for statewide office.

But Mr. Stupak and Mr. Hoekstra are, although their public stance is the standard "I like what I'm doing."

Mr. Hoekstra and Mr. Camp have solidly Republican districts. On paper, Mr. Stupak's sprawling 31-county district is considered marginally Republican and has been trumpeted as a 2008 target by the Michigan GOP.

I don't see Republicans taking Mr. Stupak's seat as long as he is in it, or until they nominate a well-known and well-financed candidate.

Among Mr. Stupak's three Republican challengers, energetic state Representative Tom Casperson, a trucker from Escanaba, has drum-beating support from GOP leaders in Lansing and Washington who see him as a potential winner. Mr. Stupak gibes that the term-limited lawmaker is "looking for a job."

Mr. Stupak's other challengers are retired businessman Don Hooper of Iron River, who got about a third of the vote as the GOP nominee in 2002, 2004, and 2006, and makes a fourth bid running with "conservative Christian values," and attorney Linda Goldthorpe from Curtis, who is running as "a Ron Paul Republican."

In announcing for re-election to reporters on a two-peninsula conference call, Mr. Stupak said, "I'm just as excited now as I was 16 years ago" when he first ran. As a political "junkie," he finds this year's presidential election particularly zesty.

But Mr. Stupak, an early supporter of former Senator John Edwards who was opposed to the January 15 Michigan primary as nothing more than a meaningless "beauty contest" since it was not sanctioned by the national party, said he would not make a choice between Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama for the Democratic nomination while party leaders seek to resolve the lingering dispute over seating Michigan delegates.

Mr. Stupak has been pushing a complicated alternative solution that would allocate Michigan's delegates based in part on votes for Clinton and "uncommitted" (a percentage of which would go to Obama), and on percentages coming out of the remaining state votes.

Two days after Mr. Stupak spoke, the state Legislature's attempt for a Michigan re-do collapsed.

Detroit Debacle

It's a city council matter replete with congressional relationships.

Monica Conyers, president pro tem of the Detroit City Council and wife of Representative John Conyers, was the only dissenting voter last week when the council voted 7-1 for a non-binding resolution calling on Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, son of Representative Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, to resign in the wake of a text message scandal involving whether he lied about having an affair with his chief of staff, who has resigned.

Monica Conyers said, "Stop playing symbolic games with symbolic resolutions that make us look like we are doing something when in point of fact we are doing nothing but playing feel-good games that get headlines, TV and radio breaking-news flashes."

Councilwoman Barbara-Rose Collins, 1991-96 congresswoman defeated in the 1996 Democratic primary 51%-31% by Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick (who once made an unsuccessful bid for the city council), said, "The city has been hammered, I believe, in going about the business of managing the city. I think at this point the mayor should consider resigning so the city can get back to business as normal."

In her biographical submission to the state-published *Michigan Manual*, Congresswoman Kilpatrick said her son "was elected in 1996 to the Michigan House of Representatives and filled the seat his mother vacated.

Kwame Kilpatrick went on to become Michigan's youngest-ever and first African-American State House Democratic Leader. In 2001, he was elected Mayor of Detroit."

While my focus here today has been on congressional politics Up North, who among us, on either side of the bridge, would not be interested in the soap opera, with all of its congressional ties, on how the political world turns these days in Detroit?

George Weeks retired in 2006 after 22 years as political columnist for *The Detroit News*. His weekly *Michigan Politics* column is syndi-

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Right Questions Must Be Asked About New Hospital

To the Editor:

As many people in the community, I would like to see a new hospital built. I would also like a new Cadillac, as well, but I simply can't afford one. It disturbs me when I read of private committees formed to make decisions regarding multi-million dollar projects that will ultimately fall to the taxpayers, while our county commissioners (our elected decision makers) are being kept in the dark. Our community is in a time when residents are struggling to make ends meet while our taxes and utilities continue to escalate - during a time when we were just asked to approve a \$900,000 operational subsidy, and a reported loss in hospital operations. How in the world can we afford yet more?

Ron Mitchell was quoted as saying that if the new hospital fails, then we will not, as taxpayers, be held responsible for the \$35 million debt. What will happen [is] we, as taxpayers, will be asked to subsidize even a larger obligation, or maybe there is a company that repossesses businesses you cannot afford in the first place.

It disturbs me our county commissioners were purposely left in the dark while a private hospital committee was formed making decisions which will effect us all. I believe we need to let our elected county officials do their jobs with information when asked for. The cost of the old building empty is

going to be much larger than people anticipate; it can easily exceed \$100,000 per year for utilities alone.

Yes, I would like a new hospital, but there needs to be a lot more open discussion on the true price tag. I applaud the county commissioners when they refuse to be steamrolled on a project as expensive as this.

It appalls me when I hear the "new proposed board of the hospital" making excuses and giving examples of Northern Michigan Regional Hospitals as a reason to have "private" non-public meetings. We are a community hospital system, and should be able to participate in its governance.

I believe a new hospital would be nice, but as a local citizen, I question the motives and maneuvers on how this project is progressing and the hidden expenses that will ultimately be passed on to taxpayers. I hope our commissioners ask all the appropriate questions.

Brian Schoenborn
St. Ignace

Editor's note: *The hospital's new governing board was first announced in The St. Ignace News in the October 13, 2005, issue, which is available free on our Web site. Mr. Schoenborn's utility estimate is based, he says, on his experience as a former nursing home administrator.*

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The quotation under the flag of *The St. Ignace News* on Page 1 is from the 10 triads written by Dr. Fred Newton Scott, creator and teacher of the first continuous course in journalism in the United States at the University of Michigan in 1890. The 10 triads are chiseled on the parapet of the Detroit News Building at 615 Lafayette Boulevard, Detroit. They were headed "Ideals of the Press" or "The Newspaper in a Free Society," and serve as a reminder of what a free press means to us.

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