



Tri-City board refuses to face unpleasant reality



2:00 a.m. May 23, 2009

Imagine a car fire in the parking lot at Tri-City Hospital. Is there any doubt, in the public's mind, that this board of directors would be debating a month later on whether to call the Fire Department?

(Relax Security, we're sure you folks would have extinguished the fire immediately, inquired whether medical assistance was needed from a cracker-jack staff of doctors and nurses, asked a Pink Lady to comfort the victims, and helped arrange for a way home.)

Yet, there is a fire in the figurative sense at Tri-City and a month later the board of the taxpayer-owned and half-century-old hospital is still debating about whom to call.

A month ago, Dr. Richard Burruss, chief of medical staff, gave a 20-minute presentation detailing the problems at Tri-City, and the various forms of hospital operation and governance available today. He asked, no implored, the board to consider the patients, the nurses, the doctors and the donors and to form a task force of all stakeholders with an expert as leader. The task force would report back in 90 days on whether there is a better alternative for Tri-City, a district hospital owned by taxpayers and financed in part through property taxes.

The district concept got hospitals built in rural California right after World War II. But this is the 21st century, much has changed, and the district concept is in rapid decline. That's the view of most observers, save for a few on the Tri-City Healthcare District Board of Directors.

All the board was asked to do was to form a task force and wait for a report. It was not asked to commit to any concept. The board still would retain control. There can be no structural change without a vote of the board and a vote of the public.

It's hardly a surprise that this board is still debating. The fire is raging – outrageous interest costs will continue for another month. The district's legal counsel, having decided it no longer wants any part of this bunch (who can blame), was due to depart April 30, leaving the district unrepresented. It took the board four separate votes just to ask counsel to stay on for a month. A hospital with no money is taking solace that the state may – may – waive seismic requirements until 2020 or 2030. Otherwise, Tri-City is history.

Given that director Ron Mitchell was out of town on business and the results of a vote were unpredictable, a month's delay may have been for the best.

This is an important vote and a seven-member board needs to show that it is up to the task of running a \$300 million operation. To do that, it must chase away muddled thinking before taking on the simple question of authorizing a task force study.

Muddled thinking, case one: RoseMarie Reno, who lasted all of four months as chairwoman, said it is important for a proponent of district hospital governance to appear before the board and lobby for the status quo. No great harm in that. But no one is advocating for any specific alternative and Ralph Ferguson of the California Association of District Hospitals really should be making his presentation to a task force, charged with evaluating all options.

Muddled thinking, case two: Director George Coulter said that something a half-century-old is not necessarily bad. He's proud of something that's, oh, 233 years old. Why thank you, Mr. Coulter, we're proud to be Americans, too. But what does that have to do with the issue at hand? To take your analogy to its fullest, without change we still would be a nation with slaves and with women unable to vote.

Muddled thinking, case three: Director Kathleen Sterling suggested that all seven directors sit on the task force. Let's introduce the board to a new management concept: d-e-l-e-g-a-t-e. Appoint a couple representatives, sure. But there are too many other fires demanding of board member time to spend on an issue that is coming back to the directors anyway. And, what task force could possibly accomplish anything with seven board members sitting at the table, all lobbing grenades at each other?

The audience at the last meeting got it. About 300 people filled every chair and stood elbow to elbow around the perimeter. The crowd gave a standing ovation to Burruss and later cheered the public speakers, all of whom advocated for a task force. Later, Reno/Coulter diehards egged them on. All four partisans.

The theatrics resume at 3:30 p.m. Thursday in the hospital's basement.

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