

**Union-Tribune Editorial**

Troubled Tri-City

Hospital board vetoes study of its problems

2:00 a.m. June 3, 2009

Hopes had built that Tri-City Hospital's eccentric four-person board majority might crack for a moment of rationality. Just one defector was needed to authorize a task force to study the facility's financial problems and report back on whether a sale or alliance might bring in capital the institution needs so badly.

The swing vote was supposed to be Charlene Anderson, a registered nurse elected in November on an AFL-CIO slate with RoseMarie Reno, Kathleen Sterling and George Coulter.

Anderson, who works for Heritage Clinic and not for Tri-City, told a board meeting Thursday she could not vote for a task force while a shortage of aides stretches nurses too thin at the hospital. Later, she told an interviewer the task force proposal was a political slap at the majority and one she could never accept.

So Tri-City remains a muddled mess, with a newly constituted board in denial. It has lost three bond issues to meet state seismic issues and upgrade a facility that dates to the 1960s. Tri-City has no money to rebuild and two attempts to refinance costly long-term debt have failed because potential lenders became leery. The firing of nine executives in a special session that may have violated the state's open meeting laws will continue to send legal bills soaring. An insurance provider switch means Tri-City just lost a quarter of its business to Scripps. As Tri-City's notoriety grows, doctors and independent patients are starting to vote with their feet.

Anderson and Reno are proud of the 50,000 votes they received in November, interpreting the election results as a solid show of public support in them. Yet, this was a low-profile race with eight candidates. A labor-backed slate prevailed, reminiscent of the capture of the Vista Unified School District by a Christian coalition in 1992. Two years of turmoil over prayer, creationism, morality and reproductive education ensued before a recall changed the balance.

The task force proposal would have involved all stakeholders in a study of whether another form of governance or an alliance with another institution would strengthen Tri-City and provide access to capital. Palomar Pomerado Health System, another taxpayer-owned health care district, has expressed interest in a possible affiliation.

District hospitals, financed through property tax assessments, were popular in post-World War II

California, getting hospitals built in rural areas. But Oceanside, Vista and Carlsbad are no longer rural. Residents balk at increasing their property taxes to rebuild hospitals. Of 77 districts in the state, 30 no longer own or operate a hospital.

Against this backdrop, the board majority refused to even look at anything other than the status quo. Anderson was booed roundly after her vote by an audience composed mostly of medical professionals. She stood up and asked the audience, "Do you guys realize you are booing patient care?" "No," several responded, "we are booing you."

Look for much more booing before Tri-City has something to cheer.

In the Union-Tribune on Page B6

Find this article at:

<http://www3.signonsandiego.com/stories/2009/jun/03/lz1ed3bottom19291-troubled-tri-city/?uniontrib>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© Copyright 2007 Union-Tribune Publishing Co. • A Copley Newspaper Site

