

Hospital begins town hall meetings on sales tax

(KNZA)--The Hiawatha Community Hospital Monday evening held the first of twenty-nine town hall meetings to discuss the proposed ten-year half-cent countywide retailers sales tax to provide funding for health care services in Brown County.

Voters will decide the fate of the sales tax during a May 21 special election.

Among those attending Monday's meeting at the Fisher Center in Hiawatha were hospital staff members, providers, and board members.

Hiawatha Hospital CEO John Broberg said the 25-bed critical access hospital, which opened in 1951, is not alone in facing financial struggles, saying 69 percent of the rural hospitals in Kansas are operating in the red. In the last three years, Broberg said five hospitals have closed in Kansas, including the Horton Community Hospital in March.

Former longtime Hiawatha hospital CEO John Moore said the hospital, in the past, received a number of financial gifts, but that has changed. "We've been very fortunate over the past 68-years not to have to rely on tax support," Moore said during the meeting. "For whatever reason, and it could be many, the size of the gifts to the hospital have declined. We now come to a time when the hospital needs our assistance to ensure healthcare is here for future generations."

Hospital Chief of Staff Dr. Julie Rosa said she believes the hospital stands at a juncture. "Now is the time to recognize that with some financial sacrifice, we again can create three things. Number one, a stable hospital, and thus a stable medical staff. Number two, the recruitment of the next generation of [medical doctors]. And three, really continuity of what we see as the regional center of critical access resources in all of northeast Kansas."

Broberg said a two-pronged approach is sought to ensure the future success of the hospital: passage of the sales tax and Medicaid expansion in Kansas, with expansion of state Medicaid cited as a major benefit to the hospital. "We're a little unique because of the patients that we care for. Our hospital would benefit \$1 million a year if we had that money."

Broberg said the hospital in 2017 performed more than \$2 million in uncompensated care, and that increased to \$2.2 million in 2018.

He noted 83 percent of the current critical access hospitals in the state receive tax support.

Regarding the proposed sales tax, Broberg said a 10-year versus 5-year was chosen because it will allow the refinancing of the current industrial revenue bonds the hospital is paying on, offering a savings of nearly \$640,000. He also said it will provide funding for much-needed capital improvements.

If approved by voters, the Hiawatha Hospital would receive 80 percent of the sales tax proceeds, with 20 percent going to the city of Horton for health care services in that south Brown County community.

Broberg said the Hiawatha hospital would no longer be obligated to open a rural health clinic in Horton.

The sales tax is estimated to generate around \$700,000 annually.

Town Hall Meetings, by location, are as follows:

***Hiawatha:* 6 p.m. Monday, April 8, at Fisher Center; 10 a.m. Tuesday, April 9, at Fisher Center; 2 p.m. Wednesday, April 10, at Fisher Center; 2 p.m. Monday, April 15, at Fisher Center; 2 p.m. Monday, April 22, at Maple Grove; 10 a.m. Thursday, April 25, at Maple Grove; 6 p.m. Thursday, April 25, at First Baptist Church Family Life Center; 2 p.m. Tuesday, May 7, at Fisher Center; and 6 p.m. Thursday, May 9 at Fisher Center.**

***Horton:* 2 p.m. Tuesday, April 9, at Blue Building; 10 a.m. Thursday, April 11, at St. Leo's Parish Hall; 6 p.m. Wednesday, April 24, at St. Leo's Parish Hall; 6 p.m. Tuesday, May 7, at Blue Building; 10 a.m. Wednesday, May 8, at Blue Building; and 2 p.m. Wednesday, May 8, at Blue Building.**

***Everest:* 10 a.m. Monday, April 22, at Northfield; and 6 p.m. Tuesday, April 23, at Northfield.**

***Fairview:* 6 p.m. Thursday, April 11, at Fairview Community Center; and 10 a.m. Monday, April 15, at Fairview Community Center.**

***Morrill:* 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 10, at Morrill Community Building; and 2 p.m. Tuesday, April 16, at Morrill Community Building.**

***Powhattan:* 10 a.m. Wednesday, April 10, at Legion Hall; and 2 p.m. Tuesday, April 23, at Legion Hall.**

***Robinson:* 10 a.m. Tuesday, April 16, at Bird Cage Theatre; and 6 p.m. Thursday, April 18, at Bird Cage Theatre.**

***Reserve:* 2 p.m. Thursday, April 11, at City Hall; and 10 a.m. Tuesday, April 23, at City Hall.**

***Sabatha:* 6 p.m. Tuesday, April 16, at Community National Bank; and 2 p.m. Thursday, April 25, at Community National Bank.**

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