Residents raise questions at OMC forum

'I guess the only thing that bothers me is the largeness of (Greenville Health System). ... I don't want to get gobbled up.'

Ted Wallenius | Local resident

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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SENECA — More than 100 local residents turned out on a cold, rainy night Thursday for a forum to hear discussion on a proposed partnership between Oconee Medical Center (OMC) and Greenville Health System (GHS).

Only 10 of those in attendance actually spoke to the OMC board of directors and top officials during the forum, as others came to listen. Some expressed support for a partnership, while some expressed their confidence in OMC president and chief executive officer Jeanne Ward.

But, most had questions — questions that went unanswered.

Hunter Kome, the hospital's chief operating officer, told the audience at the beginning of the meeting that the process was too early for most questions to be answered Thursday night.

Nelson Vazquez said after the meeting that he was disappointed that there were not answers for the questions.

"I was hoping to get answers," he said. "How will they let us know the answers?"

Vazquez told the board members that while they will have to make the final decision about any partnership, he and others in the community could help with providing input about how the process works out.

SEE FORUM, PAGE A5

FOR MORE

To read a related Journal editorial, turn to page A4.

FORUM: 'There's an awful lot of things that can turn wrong'

FROM PAGE A1

"What I do ask is that when we get to those services that you ask us in the community for help," he said.

There were also questions and comments related to reports of increased salaries for many of the hospital's highest-paid employees.

Ted Wallenius said he had looked into the salaries of executives at other hospitals and believes "we're getting a bargain." He said he was concerned that Greenville Health System, which he said has total assets of $1.8 billion and about a dozen vice presidents, did not have a location he could find that listed the salaries of hospital executives.

"I guess the only thing that bothers me is the largeness of it — maybe that's necessary in this," Wallenius said. "I don't want to get gobbled up. I don't want our jobs to go over to someplace else. It typically happens. I would like the board to explore what has happened to the other hospitals that have cooperated with Greenville Hospital. What has happened to their personnel?"

Delbert McCall criticized what he called "inflated salaries" of some hospital officials.

"If we're in a budget (crunch) at Oconee and we know or we think that we're not going to have as many patients next year, then why do we keep raising the top salaries?" he asked. "We need to look at this before talking about merging with Greenville."

Sharon Brosnan asked if Greenville Health System would be sending patients to Oconee since the overnight stays are down at OMC. She also asked the board to find out, "What is in it for Greenville to take on a partnership with Greenville? That's something we the public need to know."

"I don't pretend to know anything about hospital administration," Brosnan said. "The only thing that catches my eye is when there is an outsider coming in. Right away it gets my attention, because right away I want to vet that outsider."

Bob Rao said, "if Jeanne Ward said this is going to be better, it's going to be better, and I believe that."

Still, Rao had questions. He asked who would have control of undesignated legacy gifts through the OMC Foundation, management of physicians' practices owned by the hospital and management of the hospice work.

"I know a lot about mergers and acquisitions," Rao said. "I know that after the honeymoon is over there's an awful lot of things that turn wrong and I caution the board to look after those things and make sure that we have some language that is solid."

Julie Voss, a physical therapist, said she has experience in community hospitals that have undergone mergers. She said her experience was mostly positive.

"Change is difficult, and it was difficult to embrace it, but it did nothing but benefit the hospital," Voss said. "The people who live in that community are the ones who serve the patients. That didn't change at all. I think the reality is that the change will be positive in terms of what this community receives."

Susan Stevens, an OMC employee, said she has "never worked for a better group of people." She said the compassion of the hospital will remain no matter the decision about a partnership with GHS.

"I assure you we will not give less bit of care to this community whether or not we are affiliated with Greenville," Stevens said.

Rosellen Aleguire asked about Gov. Nikki Haley's decision not to accept an expansion of Medicaid and whether such an expansion would help the hospital.

Henry Ramirez said he "trusts" Ward and has known her for a number of years, "but I would like to see more transparency," he told the board members.

Bob Toggweiler, a former OMC board member, said bond covenants are a concern for the hospital and that a partnership with GHS "could be far superior to something that could be dictated to an organization by a team of finance partners" if the hospital could not keep its bond covenants. He said he trusts the OMC board to make the right decision.

"I can assure everyone nobody cares more about what happens to all of us than the people on this board and the people in senior management," he said.

Board Chairman Rick Phillips ended the meeting sharing his mindset for the discussions with GHS.

"I can tell you from the bottom of my heart what I have in mind is what's best for the health of this community," Phillips said.

Josie Rabbitt contributed to this story.

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