

Rouche views transparency as a necessity for success at WCMH

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In an April 21 press conference, Washington County Memorial Hospital (WCMH) Interim Chief Executive Officer, Joe Rouche and WCMH Director of Public Relations, Melissa Richardson met with representatives from local newspapers in an effort to keep the public updated on the status of negotiations between Saint Vincent Health (SVH) and WCMH.

According to Rouche, SVH is still in the analysis/evaluation stage. When asked if the analysis is intended to determine if “the deal” is going to happen or if its purpose is to determine the price SVH will pay for WCMH, Rouche said, “I am an operations person, I am very good at running a hospital. Those kinds of decisions are made by people with a skill set that I don’t possess.” Rouche did say that he is confident that both SVH and WCMH are working toward “signing on the bottom line” sometime in 2009. Rouche also explained that besides managing WCMH, he has the responsibility to inventory and assess the physical plant, equipment, and other aspects of the hospital. “From my perspective as a CEO, I need to have a handle on the condition of everything from the air conditioning unit to the most minor piece of equipment. That information is also important to those within the SVH organization whose job it is to negotiate the deal with Washington County. It is crucial to know what is an asset and what is a liability.”

When asked about how open will negotiations between SVH and WCMH be, Rouche didn't seem to pull his punches. “I have learned in my 25 plus years of running hospitals that your job is much easier (in the long run) the more that you can make public. Of course, some parts of large mergers must be kept confidential until the deal is complete. However, after that point, full disclosure is always the best policy. Saying that, I have learned not to do anything that I don't want to come out later.” said Rouche. “Another thing I have learned about transparency and working in small towns is that so many people are related to one another that it is foolish to think that you can keep a secret about what is going on—it's best to be open and honest.”

Rouche and Richardson both warned about pointing fingers when asked about the public having access to information that could shed light on specifically how WCMH got in such bad shape over the last few years. “I don't think anyone intentionally did things to cause the problems the hospital is now facing.” noted Rouche, “I do think that people with good intentions made some bad decisions based on bad information and a lack of experience. More questions should have been asked by all sorts of people at all levels of responsibility. Once we are through the transition, that information should be made public.”

In response to a comment about how there seems to be a more enthusiastic and upbeat attitude exhibited by many WCMH employees, Richardson was quick to agree that there has been a definite change since Rouche's arrival. “The openness of not only Joe but all the SVH people to suggestions and concerns is a refreshing change.” observed Richardson.

The role of the WCMH Board of Trustees in running the hospital after a deal has been struck was also discussed. “I cannot speak to what kind of a relationship the hospital board and SVH will have in this specific arrangement but I can tell you how it works at other SVH facilities.” offered Rouche. “In other operations, most of the original board is kept in place for continuity purposes and two or three SVH representatives are also placed on the board. SVH and Ascension Health (SVH's parent organization and largest Catholic health care organization in the United States) have what is called an authority matrix. That matrix spells out, in detail, the

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responsibilities and authority at each level. So the local hospital board would have certain authority and responsibility, SVH would have certain authority and responsibility, and finally, Ascension Health would also have certain authority and responsibility. Authority for Board of Trustee appointments usually rests with SVH and is based on recommendations by local board members.”

The issue of community confidence and how to get the message out that things are changing are on the front burner for both Rouche and Richardson. “Public trust equates to openness. If we are transparent in everything we try to do, then people will trust us—admittedly, they may not totally agree with our plans but they will trust us. SVH is a very good health care organization. We want to get our message out to the community that we are going to do things the right way.” said Rouche.

Richardson concluded by saying that she plans to schedule news conferences every two or three weeks and when breaking news occurs.