

Record Observer

QUEEN ANNE'S COUNTY

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QA's new ER moves forward

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Staff Writer

CENTREVILLE - The Queen Anne's County Commissioners voted 5-0 on May 13 to adopt a memorandum of understanding with the University of Maryland Medical System that would guarantee a stand alone emergency center would operate in the county for three years.

UMMS still has to approve the memorandum of understanding, an agreement needed for the project to move forward. The public-private partnership would require Queen Anne's County to contribute about \$4 million in infrastructure improvements. The commissioners previously approved the county's purchase of a 14.7-acre property near Grasonville for \$600,000. The emergency center

would be built by UMMS and staffed by Shore Health System, which operates Dorchester General Hospital and Memorial Hospital at Easton. SHS is affiliated with UMMS.

The emergency center would be located between U.S. Route 50 and state Route 18, east of Nesbit Road. The memorandum of understanding calls for the county to contribute about \$2.5 million in road improvements and \$1.4 million in sewer and water improvements.

The stand alone facility would operate for at least three years, around the clock every day. The MOU calls for UMMS to begin building the emergency center within 18 months of the property being conveyed to the county from Michael

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Cooper and Bland Nesbit.

The commissioners voted to approved the MOU following a public hearing on May 13 attended by about 100 people, many of whom voiced support for the stand alone emergency center.

"What's being proposed is a 24-7 emergency facility," said Commissioner President Dr. Eric Wargotz. He said that's different from the urgent care facility operated by Anne Arundel Medical Center on Route 18 in Chester.

Kathy Deoudes, of Queenstown, submitted a petition to the commissioners signed by about 1,000 Queen Anne's County residents in favor of the UMMS emergency center. When she spoke, most of the people in the room held up flyers that read "QA ER Yes." Cindy Burke, of Centreville, thanked the commissioners for taking action on a very serious issue.

Steve Wilson, the citizen representative to the county Department of Emergency Services, said ambulance response times in the county have improved from 18 minutes to 12 minutes for 65 percent of responses but it's often a long ambulance ride to a hospital in Easton, Chestertown or Annapolis.

In the county's "Christmas tree of priorities, it's the life and limb of citizens that is paramount," said Wilson. Nick Deoudes, vice chairman of Business Queen Anne's, said citizens view construction of the emergency center "not as a luxury, but as a necessity the community needs."

"The long and short of it is, we need this ER and I would urge you to vote for it," said Andi Morony, of Centreville.

Another Centreville resident said the MOU guarantees an emergency center would operate for three years. He was concerned the commissioners would then be repeating their request for an emergency facility.

Commissioner Gene Ransom agreed the county was taking a risk, but he said UMMS is also taking a risk. He said the commissioners are asking UMMS to invest about \$14 million in capital costs and risk losing between \$2 million and \$9 million a year in operating the emergency center.

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"We think it's a fair MOU," said Wargotz. He said UMMS was making a three-year commitment on a money losing operation.

Commissioner Paul Gunther said the commissioners tried to get the best deal they could for county citizens. Although he voted for the MOU, Commissioner Courtney Billups said his primary concern was the possibility the facility would only operate three years.

Commissioner Carol Fordonski said having a stand alone emergency center in the county would save lives, provide better jobs in the county, and keep the county's emergency medical service providers in the county, instead of transporting patients to hospitals outside the county.

Several residents said the stand alone facility was needed because traffic congestion continues to get worse on the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and U.S. Route 50.

State Sen. E.J. Pipkin, R-36-Upper Shore; Del. Richard Soss, R-36-Queen Anne's; and Del. Michael Smigiel, R-36-Cecil, all spoke in support of building the emergency center. Pipkin sponsored legislation, backed by the 36th District delegation and approved by the state legislature in 2007, that allows a stand alone emergency center to operate as a pilot project in Queen Anne's County if it is built by UMMS. It would only be the second stand alone emergency facility in Maryland, said Pipkin.

Getting approval for a freestanding medical facility in Maryland is a "very complicated" issue that involves "several layers of bureaucracy," said Pipkin. He said there's only a "narrow window" of opportunity for the project in Queen Anne's County to move forward.

A handout from SHS and UMMS said the freestanding emergency center in Grasonville would total 15,700 square feet of space and it would have 11 treatment rooms, two triage rooms and on-site imaging services, including CT, ultrasound and radiography.

The emergency center would be designed to handle nearly 15,000 patient visits a year. SHS and UMMS estimates that number would be reached within the first five years of operation.