

Panel backs \$10 million in Lasata campus upgrades

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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Health, Human Services Committee urges County Board to explore financing for assisted-living facility, improvements

A \$10 million plan to build a 24-bed assisted-living facility for frail elderly people and those with dementia and make improvements to Lasata Care Center will be forwarded to the Ozaukee County Board for approval.

The Ozaukee County Health and Human Services Committee on Tuesday reiterated its support of the plan by a 2-1 vote and asked the board to move forward with financing options and design work.

The committee also defeated a move by Supr. Rick Bauzenberger of Mequon, a member of the committee, to put the project on hold until a feasibility study could be done to determine if the county should continue to operate the nursing home or instead sell or lease it to a private operator to run.

“I think we have all the information we need,” said Supr. Cynthia Bock of Mequon, the committee chairman.

The county, which has done numerous studies of the issue, committed to supporting the nursing home when it was built in 1966 and reiterated that stance when it agreed to build Lasata Crossings — an assisted-living center — on the Lasata campus, she said.

“Loud and clear, we accepted the mission of Lasata and decided to be in the nursing home business,” Bock said.

A study commissioned by the county last fall and conducted by Eppstein Uhen Architects, Findorf and Sons and WIPFLI CPAs and Consultants, recommended the county adopt a \$30 million plan that called for the county to raze and rebuild Lasata Care Center, replacing it with a 145-bed nursing home with a 30-bed community-based residential facility.

The CBRF is an assisted-living facility that would offer more services and care than Lasata Crossings, an assisted-living facility on the Lasata Campus.

Although the work could be phased in, the committee decided to downsize the project, voting 3-2 last month to approve the \$10 million plan to build a 24-bed CBRF for an estimated \$3 million to \$4 million and use the remainder of the funds to remodel Lasata Care Center.

The remodeling would include upgrading the heating, ventilating and air conditioning systems to meet current codes, renovating the tub and shower rooms, day rooms, lounges and nursing stations and adding service kitchens to resident units.

“We have a wish list, and we’ll do as much as we can with what we’re given,” Lasata Administrator Ralph Luedtke said.

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The improvements will allow the campus to offer more appropriate services to its residents, officials said, adding the project is expected to pay for itself and generate a surplus within five years.

The committee spent little time discussing the proposal.

“We have frankly talked this to death,” Bock said. “At this point, we should just make a decision and move on.”

“It seems to me this is a discussion worth having with the full board. This is something that affects every family in Ozaukee County.”

But Bauzenberger said Lasata is a business and should be looked at in that way.

Lasata Care Center is a relatively high-cost home, he said, with an average daily cost of \$225 per patient. The average daily cost for home run by a for-profit business is \$185, he said, and for those operated by non-profit-run organizations \$216.

That’s because the county employees are unionized and receive benefits, Luedtke said, adding that Lasata’s costs are less than those of other county-owned nursing homes.

While many people argue that Lasata Care Center provides a safety net for people who depend on Title 19 to pay for their care, Bauzenberger said plenty of private facilities also accept these patients.

There are 55 other nursing homes with roughly 6,600 beds within 25 miles of Lasata, he said, most of which accept Medicaid patients.

“There are plenty of providers to be that safety net,” Bauzenberger said.

But other committee members disagreed, saying that while private facilities may accept Title 19 patients, most limit the number of Medicaid residents.

“There are plenty of providers out there. I’m not sure there are that many safety nets,” Bock said.

Last year, roughly 65% of Lasata’s population were Title 19 patients, Luedtke said, noting private providers don’t serve anywhere near the same percentage.

For each Title 19 patient, he said, Lasata loses \$55 a day.

Bauzenberger suggested the county could reimburse a private provider running Lasata with a subsidy equal to the difference between the daily cost and what Title 19 pays, saying that would be less expensive than investing \$10 million in the campus.

“We can still be in the business of providing a service, but we don’t have to do it directly,” he

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said.

But Supr. Karl Hertz of Mequon, a committee member, questioned this logic.

“You would be comfortable with us subsidizing a private entity with county tax dollars, but not with us spending county tax dollars (to upgrade the campus)?” he asked.

Bauzenberger’s motion to halt the project and conduct a study on the operation of the nursing home died for lack of a second.

After the meeting, he said he may bring the motion to the County Board for consideration.