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Thermopolis
Hot Springs

Independent Record

SPECIAL INTERNET PREVIEW

VOLUME 114, No. 49, December 5, 2013

THERMOPOLIS, WY 82443

USPS 627-300

75¢

Medicaid expansion sought in legislature

by J.D. Stetson

As state legislators gear up for the upcoming 2014 budget session, the Wyoming Hospital Association is in campaign mode to expand the current state Medicaid program.

The Hot Springs County Memorial Hospital Board of Trustees heard a presentation from Dan Perdue, president of the association, during the board meeting Nov. 26.

Purdue explained that under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, states have the option to expand their Medicaid program to cover additional residents with 100 percent of the expansion costs covered by the federal government for the first three years, and at least 90 percent covered after 2016.

In the previous legislative session, the state Department of Health sought the expansion but the bill failed in committee. Purdue said many of the legislators wanted to wait and see how other aspects of the federal law would play out.

Purdue presented the board with a number of facts about expanding Medicaid in Wyoming that include:

The estimated number of new Medicaid enrollees under the expansion would be about 17,600 people.

The expansion would help reduce the cost of uncompensated care to Wyoming hospitals. In 2012, hospitals wrote off \$211.8 million in uncompensated care.

The estimated additional federal dollars injected into the Wyoming health care system for the next six years would be about \$864.4 million.

The expansion would allow the state to eliminate several state-funded safety net programs without reducing care.

The net savings to the state's general fund for the next six years would be about \$47.4 million.

Purdue further explained that the state could choose to include an "escape clause" in its law to exit the expansion programs should the federal government not keep its promise to pay expansion costs.

Discussion

Also in attendance during the meeting were Rep. Nathan Winters and County Commissioners John Lumley and Mike Baker.

The discussion of whether to expand the program touched on issues of sustainability and politics surrounding the Affordable Care Act.

Lumley questioned how many uninsured people in Hot Springs County would be added to the exchange. Purdue said the associa-

tion did not have a breakdown by county; however, Hospital CEO Robin Roling said the hospital wrote off about \$1.4 million in charity care and bad debt last year.

Baker and Winters each discussed the long-term politics of the expansion, specifically the expansion's plan to eliminate safety-net programs or the prospect of the federal government renegeing on its promise. Baker said participants would present emotional turmoil to the legislators whenever government chooses to end or cut back a benefits program.

Winters questioned the sustainability of the expansion given the current level of federal government debt and the prospect of the federal government renegeing in the future.

"Once it's on our rolls, it will be difficult to remove," Winters said.

The hospital board members refuted the fears over future sustainability of the program. Currently, hospitals are bearing the burden of uncompensated care, which is because hospitals are required to treat patients who come to the emergency room regardless of whether the patient is insured or can pay for the care.

By placing an additional 17,600 people under Medicaid, hospitals hope to reduce the amount of uncompensated care and increase the amount of care for people in need.

Purdue explained that while Medicaid might not cover the entire cost of medical treatment, the hospitals would at least receive some compensation instead of nothing.

Roling further elaborated on the current philosophy overtaking health care in the wake of the Affordable Care Act. The philosophy focuses on preventative care in order to reduce readmissions to the hospital and create long-term savings.

The savings sought under preventative care – combined with lessened costs to hospitals for uncompensated care – would help reduce the impact down the road in the wake of future changes to the health care landscape. Specifically, that would be reductions in Medicare reimbursement to hospitals.

Resignations

Also during the meeting, Ellen Roden submitted a letter of resignation from the hospital board – citing other obligations that require her attention.

Beth Drake also announced her resignation from the board that will become effective after the Dec. 17 board meeting. Drake said she and her husband, Guy Drake, plan to retire and move away from the community.

Parade of lights



Santa and Mrs. Claus arrived in Thermopolis in style aboard an antique fire truck in the Lighted Christmas Parade last Saturday night. Float winners for the event

were Thermopolis Rehabilitation and Care Center taking first place, Thermopolis Cowboy Rencdevous PRCA Rodeo in second and Thermopolis Post Office placing third.

Mead's biennial budget supports saving

Gov. Matt Mead submitted his proposed budget proposal for the next two years on Friday. In contrast to the steep upward trajectory of state spending over the last decade, Mead's budget is flat. Stemming the tide of budget growth of previous years is a priority for the governor.

The budget proposal for the next two years also supports the long-standing policy of saving – both in permanent and more flexible ways. Right now, Wyoming has significant savings in various accounts. Returns on savings invested contribute to Wyoming's positive revenue outlook and provide protection against revenue downturns.

"Wyoming has a hard-earned and well-deserved reputation as an economic leader in the nation. Today we remain in an enviable position. We can ask how much should we save and how much should we spend on services, healthy communities and effective delivery of services," Mead said. "I recommend a budget that continues to save – both in dollars and in infrastructure development – and that ensures the delivery of effective, efficient services by cities and towns, and by counties and the state. It is a budget that continues to guard against the explosive growth of the last decade and a budget which positions Wyoming to effectively serve its citizens."

Mead's proposal of \$3.3 billion in total spending, including one-time and ongoing,

is almost identical to what he proposed two years ago and is down from total spending in the last two-year period.

"Financially, we are on surer ground than we were a year ago. We are fortunate that state revenues are higher than forecast, so we do not need to repeat the painful process of cutting budgets again, but we should not get ahead of ourselves and spend like there is no tomorrow," Mead said.

This proposal also leaves \$219 million available for the Wyoming Legislature for its priorities and for saving. The governor, within this budget, identifies priorities for the state. These include pay increases for employees (state, judiciary, University of Wyoming, community colleges and K-12 teachers), the unified network, support for local government and more resources to reduce the waiting list for the developmentally disabled.

"Wyoming is and has been smart with its money. We are not shortsighted. We know we have the ability to continue saving but



Gov. Matt Mead

also to strategically deploy resources," Mead said.

Infrastructure projects in this budget include:

- the unified network to bring state-of-the-art technology, capacity and efficiency to every corner of the state;

- local government projects;

- an updated University of Wyoming College of Engineering facility;

- new schools;

- funding for court security and school safety; and

- updates to the State Hospital, Life Resource Center, Boys' School and National Guard armories.

"Infrastructure is another form of savings and it does not fluctuate with the market. It supports local communities, commerce, industry, education and citizens. Projects from highways to school buildings are long-term investments that return dividends to the State in real and diverse ways," Mead said.

The state's standard budget has flattened over the last few years after a period of steep growth. This year's budget continues the flat trend in spending despite additions to the Department of Health's budget, statutorily driven budget increases and inflation.

Holiday Tour of Homes

The annual Holiday Tour of Homes benefiting People for People in Thermopolis is set to begin at 5 p.m. Monday, Dec. 9.

Tours of four local homes and a live nativity scene at Risen Son Southern Baptist Church are planned for the evening along with a reception at the Hot Springs County Museum and Cultural Center.

Tickets are \$6 and may be purchased in advance at Storyteller, Needful Things, The Shoppe, Nu Vogue, A Cut Above, Gottsche and Flying Eagle Gallery or from any committee member.

Hours will be from 5 to 8:30 p.m.

If you have any questions about the tour, call Judy Carswell at 921-8264.



Santa's Workshop is one of 15 trees displayed at the hospital lobby for the Christmas Tree and Wreath Festival. Dena Anderson, left, and daughter Ashle McLean decorate their It's My Party tree. Doris Ann Ready, Anderson's mother and McLean's grandmother, helped with the tree.

Trees, wreaths now on display in HSCMH lobby

Festival features dinner and auction Tuesday evening

The 13th Annual Thermopolis Christmas Tree and Wreath Festival is in full swing with trees and wreaths now available for viewing in the lobby at Hot Springs County Memorial Hospital.

The hospital and Red Rock Family Practice have partnered to host the annual fundraising event this year.

Proceeds from the auction go into the Thermopolis Community Fund, which provides several groups with fund-

ing for community projects throughout the year.

Numerous businesses were hard at work during the weekend decorating trees, which will be on display in the hospital lobby until the dinner and auction Tuesday evening.

The dinner will be served at 5:30 p.m. and the auction will start at 6:30 p.m. The trees will be delivered to the buyers Wednesday, Dec. 11.

For more information about the festival, contact Cassie at Red Rock Family Practice at 864-5534.

A complete listing of wreaths and trees up for auction is listed in the advertisement on page 16 of this newspaper.