



Polk County Commission votes to use \$3.7M for residency program at Winter Haven Hospital

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BARTOW — County commissioners voted 5-0 on Tuesday to use \$3.7 million from the indigent health care fund to help finance a clinic at Winter Haven Hospital for a family medicine residency program.

The money will be used for construction and administrative salaries for the first year of the program.

County officials said the hope is for some of the doctors to stay in the area once they've completed their residency.

According to figures, Polk County has a shortage of doctors: There are 50 primary care doctors per 100,000 residents. Statewide, the numbers are at 77 primary care doctors per 100,000 residents.

The county plans to reimburse the hospital for money it spends, according to documents provided by the county. The hospital will provide the county with quarterly reports relating to a partnership with Florida State University College of Medicine, recruitment and hiring of a physician program director and program manager, acquiring accreditation from the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, recruitment and acceptance of residents, and securing physician faculty.

Before the vote, members of the Polk Ecumenical Action Council for Empowerment said they were upset that money intended for the indigent was being used to build a clinic at a hospital.

"I want to be sure this money is serving the poor," said Ron Brlansky, a member of St. Joseph's Catholic Church.

Currently, there is \$85 million in the indigent health care fund.

Members of PEACE said that although the indigent sales tax issue passed in November 2016, some county commissioners had not followed through with funding for additional mental health services.

“How do you spend \$3 million to \$4 million on a building and call it indigent care,” asked Craig McIntosh, a member of First United Methodist Church in Lakeland.

“We have not seen what has been promised,” First United Methodist Rev. Andy Whitaker Smith said.

But Commissioner John Hall said he never committed to using funds to increase services.

“I understand your position and passion,” Hall said. “But I said I was willing to discuss doing that if the sales tax passed.”

Hall said later he’s still willing to discuss the additional mental health funding, but added there are plans already to increase dollars for mental health care.

He lauded the deal with the hospital as a way to serve the indigent.

“We’re underserved right now,” Hall said.-

Commissioner Bill Braswell agreed.

“The long-term benefit is more doctors in Polk for the indigent,” Braswell said after the vote. “It’s short sighted to think otherwise.”

In August, Steve Nierman, president of Winter Haven Hospital, said the family-medicine residency program was aimed at providing primary care to underserved, at-risk, rural and elderly residents.

The 12,000-square-foot training facility and clinic will be next to the Winter Haven Hospital Center for Behavioral Health.

The first class of six is expected to arrive in July 2020. Each of the next two years, six more students would be added to the roster so eventually the program would have 18 residents on a continuing basis.

The students would train at the new clinic, Winter Haven Hospital and Winter Haven Women’s Hospital, Bartow Regional Medical Center, federally qualified health clinic sites, which are operated locally by Central Florida Health Care, regional volunteer clinics, and other locations as needed, according to the proposal Nierman submitted to the county. Winter Haven Hospital, Winter Haven Women’s Hospital and Bartow Regional Medical Center are affiliated with the nonprofit BayCare Health Systems.

Hospital and FSU officials will talk about the new program at noon Friday at the Winter Haven Hospital Auditorium.

Florida State President John Thrasher is expected to speak at the event.