

**By Reed Anfinson**

**Publisher**

**Swift County Monitor-News**

Development of an affiliation agreement that would see Carris Health based in Willmar take over management of Swift County-Benson Health Services will move forward.

At a meeting Sept. 3, the SCBHS Governing Board unanimously voted to sign a letter of intent to pursue affiliation through a lease agreement with Carris Health. At a joint meeting of the Benson City Council and Swift County Board of Commissioners at SCBHS Monday night, the two members that make up the hospital district gave their blessing for the proposed affiliation to move forward. Any final agreement with Carris will need county and city approval.

Carris Health is based in Willmar and is a subsidiary of CentraCare Health of St. Cloud. CentraCare sees Carris becoming a southern hub for its outreach to rural community hospitals.

In addition to representatives of the city, county and hospital at Monday night's meeting were Co-CEO of Carris Health Dr. Cindy Firkins Smith of Willmar, Co-CEO of Carris Health Mike Schramm, and Joe Hellie, vice president of strategy and network development for CentraCare.

With the approval of the hospital district partners, SCBHS and Carris will now work out the details of a lease agreement. That work should be completed by the end of the year and implemented in early 2020.

Earlier in the day, the CentraCare and Carris financial committee had met to discuss whether or it wanted to take on SCBHS with its nearly \$17 million in debt related to hospital and clinic renovations, and the building of Scandi Haven Village. Further, another \$5 million in capital expenses for equipment, renovations, and medical records software is needed in the next several years.

Though there are risks, and there was a "robust" discussion about those risks, Hellie said the committee also thought SCBHS was a good investment. Firkins Smith added that there is risk involved in all of rural health care today.

If a lease agreement is signed, the SCBHS governing board will continue to have an advisory role with Carris. It will meet periodically to ensure that the commitments Carris makes to the local hospital, clinic and community are carried through with in the coming years.

While the lease agreement would be for 30 years and renewable for another 30, significant changes could come after seven years. One clause in the agreement states that Carris would not be obligated to provide inpatient care in the community after the first seven years.

Hellie explained that in this rapidly changing world of how medical care is provided no one knows what innovations will revolutionize further patient procedures, treatment and care. We could see innovations that seem to come right out of a Star Trek episode.

Also, Blue Cross Blue Shield is playing pivotal role in driving hospitals care services, Firkins Smith said. It is literally telling patients it will pay them to go to facilities that provide cheaper procedures and show quicker outcomes than the local hospital.

Even with the payment, what they will save on procedure costs is considerable. It is also pushing toward having more procedures done outside of rural hospitals.

Firkins Smith said that providing those procedures is fundamental to the financial health of rural hospitals where a large majority of patients are on Medicare or Medicaid. The BCBS executive she heard speak on the topic said there was no plan to deal with the potential devastation its plan would mean for rural hospitals.

Firkins Smith and Hellie both said that through the collaborative efforts of Carris, CentraCare, and SCBHS, as well as other affiliated clinics and hospitals, rural health care has the best chance for developing models that will have the best chance of ensuring their financial health.