

PUBLIC HEARING – OCTOBER 26, 2016

Mayor Grenier opened the duly scheduled and advertised Public Hearing at approximately 6:30 p.m. to hear comments on the future of the City of Berlin Health Department.

Mayor Grenier took a moment to review the ground rules of the public hearing. This meeting is informational only. The Council has not made any decisions either way regarding the Health Department. They are seeking guidance from the public. He stated that the Council is looking for public opinion on the subject matter. Comments are to be limited to three minutes or less, and asked for everyone to respect the opinions of others.

After introducing himself as well as Council members, Mayor Grenier presented facts regarding the subject matter.

About four years ago, the Council faced this dilemma. While it had been looked into the Council did not look hard and/or deep enough. Historically the Health Department has made a little money or at least broke even. Over the last couple of years the department has shown losses, noting that last year's loss was approximately \$59,000. Three months into this fiscal year the department is in the hole approximately \$100,000. Much of the problem is the fact that Medicare's reimbursement regulations are stricter. Other local agencies have consolidated. AVH closed their operations in 2014 due to their department's losses. North Woods Home Health is merging with Littleton Regional Hospital because of operational losses. If the City elects to close its Health Department, it will not be because of bad service. The City employees are providing premier service in Coos County.

Mayor Grenier stated that Coos County operates two nursing homes and Medicaid has lagged far behind in the operation of nursing homes. Between the two homes, Coos County has been carrying a loss of approximately 9.7 million dollars. 1996 was the last year that Coos County made money in the operation of the nursing homes.

Personnel is very difficult to get. Both nursing homes are currently lacking staff. WMCC had stopped the nursing program, which should be starting up again next fall, but has created problems with obtaining nursing staff in the area.

The proposed budget for the County is approximately 14.4 million dollars which is 1.8 million more than the previous year. The pressure of increasing tax dollars is not just in Berlin but at this point is County wide. Berlin's portion of the County tax dollars is about 1.1 million dollars.

The Council is not taking this decision lightly. All nine members agree that Berlin visitor nurses is unsustainable and cannot operate as it is any further. Mayor Grenier stated that this should be an Androscoggin Valley service. Berlin may be taking the lead in this matter, but we need to put our heads together in the valley. The County proposed budget numbers had not been presented to the Council before this meeting. Mayor Grenier realizes that the City employs the brightest minds. He suggested a task force be created to pull together something. He noted that the department would not shut down tomorrow. An exit plan would need to be devised. His personal feeling is that if the City continues with these services, the current model would need to be fixed as in its current state is broken.

Jim Wheeler, City Manager, presented a condensed version of the report the City received from Simone, a third party consultant that specializes in health. Simone was hired by the City to assess the current operations of the Health Department and provide options for its future. The Rumney Sisters Trust funds were used to complete the study.

Mr. Wheeler explained that as the department belongs to the residents of the City, the Council is looking for input from the public. Financial implications come back to the taxpayers because in order for the department to remain in place, tax dollars will need to be used subsidize the department.

The following information is from the Simone Assessment:

Simione Options:

1. Continue to operate a Health Department that provides Medicare certified home health services and health promotion activities.
2. Continue to operate a Health Department that provides health promotion activities only and develop an exit strategy for Medicare certified home health services.
3. Discontinue both Medicare certified home health services and health promotion activities.

If the City choose Option 1:

- ▶ Need an Electronic Medical Record, EMR
- ▶ Need to implement new policies and processes.
- ▶ Need staffing adjustments and changes to salary and wage structure.

These items are estimated to cost \$250,000 in Year 1 and \$148,000 per year each year thereafter. Changes are expected to produce higher productivity, therefore more revenue but this is difficult to estimate.

If the City choose Option 2:

- ▶ On average we currently see 2 to 4 clinic patients per day.
- ▶ Could be offered on a part-time basis by scheduling clinics for specific hours and days.
- ▶ Would require tax revenue to cover staffing cost and supplies.

Important questions that must be asked:

- ▶ Are we willing to spend funding required (\$250,000) to make necessary adjustments in software and staffing?
- ▶ Are we willing to accept and continue to operate in the uncertainty related to Medicare reimbursement?
- ▶ Even though they put a burden on the General Fund (tax revenue)?

If the City elected to close the department:

- ▶ We would develop a transition plan
- ▶ Plan would include placement of existing patients with the other Home Health agencies.
- ▶ Plan would be executed over a period of months.

Facts worth noting:

- ▶ There are other Medicare certified home health providers that serve our area.
- ▶ One of Medicare's goals is agency consolidation to reduce cost.
- ▶ We've confirmed that 11 of the other 12 NH Cities do not operate visiting nurse programs.
- ▶ There is a national and local nursing shortage!
- ▶ Every \$100,000 in General Fund expense is approximately \$0.25 on the tax rate.
- ▶ Berlin Home Health provides excellent care!

Mayor Grenier recognized letters that were sent to the City. All of the letters gave the highest praise to the City. This matter has nothing to do with quality of care, but the program is at a crossroad.

Mayor Grenier opened the floor for public comment:

Kelly Corcoran, RN, City of Berlin - Ms. Corcoran stated that she was not concerned for her job but was concerned for those patients that are private pay. The nurses do a lot of visits for foot care, PT I and R, which indicates blood thickness, for those people that cannot get out. We charge a nominal fee for those services. The nurses may sometimes need to check in with people several times a month. This area has the lowest income and the City needs to help support those residents. She also noted that most of the local VA patients are serviced through the City. If the City closed the department, all of these patients would need to go to Littleton. While there are other competent agencies in the area, they are a bigger scale and it can take quite a bit of time to get staff to homes. When the City is called, they can get there right away. Ms. Corcoran also noted that the department services other towns like Randolph, Shelburne and Gorham. She loves what she does and would like to continue working for the City and retire from here.

Pauline Tibbets, 300 High St. - I am here as a citizen of Berlin. Berlin Public Health has been here for over 80 years. She said that her personal experience started as a child with vaccinations and wellness physicals at school. She has used the services for her children, her husband as well as her mother, who is residing at St. Regis. She is not worried about taxes. She would rather put her money towards an agency that serves this area.

Dave Dube, Coos County Family Health Services – Mr. Dube stated that years ago patients that were ill could stay in hospitals longer. However, with the changes to the health care system, patients are sent home sooner. Coos County Family Health Services relies on the City's Health Department. He is concerned that if the City cuts this program, people will end up going without this service. He knows that the Council does a great job at cutting costs for the City, but he feels the City needs these services. CCFHS has a lot of experience and is in the same difficult financial situation. They would like to work with the City to develop a coalition.

Debbie Martin, 265 Norway St., LNA at AV Home Health Care, - She stated that when the hospital nurses broke off from them and went to North Woods, those nurses are now working longer hours and the change-over is not what they thought it would be. AV Home Health Care will probably lose about 60% of their business if the City closes.

Pete Gagnon, Madison Avenue – Mr. Gagnon stated he can understand the concern with spending money. He has been here for about four years now. He feels that the updating needs to be done. The department would be more efficient. The City currently has young new nurses, now is the time to do the change-over. He noted that he feels it would be a disservice to the City if the department closes.

John Roy, Norway St. – Mr. Roy's son Travis utilizes the services provided by the City on a monthly basis. He is a working single dad that utilizes the services provided. It is convenient and provides in and out service.

Theodore Bosen, 13 Bisson Road - Mr. Bosen stated that he has been here for approximately 2.5 years and that his is originally from Massachusetts. Prior to coming here he spent almost a year at home. If he did not have the opportunity to use home health care he would have had to use a skilled nursing facility. Berlin has an aging community and will only have to pay more to assist with payment of supporting residents needing to use skilled health care facilities if the department closes. He is now retired, and while he did not have to come to Berlin to live, the Home Health Care Department was certainly one of the items that was a deciding factor for him. In order for Berlin to keep people here, the community needs to realize the quality of life that residents are looking for.

Sharon Fortin, 86 Lancaster Road, Gorham – While Mrs. Fortin is not a resident of Berlin, her 82 year old mother is from Milan. She had spent several weeks in the hospital. The only way that she got to come home when she did was because she was able to obtain home health care. It is a known fact that it is better to recuperate at home.

Janice Corcoran, Milan - She told the Council that she would not be doing as well as she is without the City program. She probably would have had to go to a nursing home. PT had gone to her house to show the City nurses what needed to be completed. The City visited her home for four weeks. She stated that anything she could help the City with in keeping this program open, she would be happy to do what she can. She suggested that maybe Milan could assist with funding.

Danielle Warner, Medical Biller, 473 Grafton St. - Ms. Warner stated that she is the only one doing billing in the department. Over the last few years, the department has lost five nurses. The current nurses are working more hours, which is creating more overtime hours. She still has approximately \$87,000 to bill, and she is still working on \$10,000 from the VA. She will get the money the City deserves and is owed. She stated that the years the department did make money the City put the money back into the general fund rather than using it for billing upgrades, etc. If the City closes the department, it will not just affect us, but will effect AV Home Health Care and AVH.

Kelly Cote, 109 Park St. - She works as a visiting nurse. This program allows people to stay in their homes longer. She wants to see the department to stay open so her parents can use these benefits. It is important for Berlin to keep these services for the aging population. We need the security for the residents.

Jacqueline Duclos, 365 Portland St. - Her husband is 86 years old. When she needs anything, the nurses are right there for her. Their home has stairs that her husband can no longer manage, the nurses are a godsend to them.

Mike Campbell 661 Howland St. - Mr. Campbell's daughter is a nurse. His wife is currently having health problems and the City nurses are visiting as well as AV Home Health Care's cleaning services. He will gladly pay more tax money to support this program. Our elders have taught us what we know, and we need to take care of them now.

Doris Fortier, 510 Norway St. – Ms. Fortier stated she is a newbie to the department. She has worked in nursing for 20 years and worked at both Coos County Nursing Home and St. Vincent's and their skilled nursing. If the City eliminates the program, people will need to go to skilled nursing homes. She feels this will jeopardize residents in the communities. There is currently a lack of nurses in the area. She is concerned if this program is discontinued, people will be left to die alone.

Deb Martin - Ms. Martin stated that when she calls for a City nurse, they are there and take care of the issues quickly. She sees Berlin getting smaller and older and asked the Council to consider a volunteer fire department before they close the department.

Mayor Grenier thanked everyone for attending this important public hearing. The Council has not made any decisions for or against. However, Mayor Grenier has a sneaking idea that the decision will be to keep this service. He noted that in order to do so, large changes would need to be made to bring the program into the 21st century. The City will need the support of AVH, other municipalities and public. There is lots of work to be done with the program and the Council is not afraid of a challenge but will need help.

There being no further business before the Mayor and Council, Councilor Rozek moved with a second by Councilor Theberge to adjourn the regular meeting. So moved, the motion carried and Mayor Grenier declared the regular meeting adjourned at approximately 8:04 P.M.

A True Record, Attest:

Elaine Riendeau
City Clerk