St. Martin plans to expand hospital district

By Jonas Breaux
Staff Writer

BREAUX BRIDGE — Patients are the lifeblood of any hospital but without an adequate number of physicians to attend to the needy, there is little use for a hospital, says the chief executive officer of St. Martin Parish's only hospital.

In the last 10 years, the number of doctors with practices in St. Martin Parish plummeted from 12 to only four, says Gary Memorial Hospital's CEO Burton Dupuis.

Dupuis has been making the rounds of parish governmental and civic bodies recently plugging a proposal which would expand Gary's hospital district and thereby boost hospital revenues.

The Gary Memorial CEO says expanding and increasing the tax base will enable the hospital to provide a full-time emergency room (24 hours per day, seven days per week) and hopefully funds to attract young doctors to the parish.

However, to accomplish this, Dupuis said the hospital district would need to be expanded to include "the whole parish," which would require approval of parish voters.

"When the hospital district was created 25 years ago it included mainly the Breaux Bridge area because at that time there were hospitals in Cecilia and St. Martinville," Dupuis said. "Now we are the only hospital in the parish and we feel our market is parish-wide. We've made and are making changes to meet the demands of the community."

According to Dupuis, the hospital district currently receives approximately $95,000 annually from a 4.75 mills property tax. He said the tax is dedicated to operating and maintaining the hospital.

"We are proposing to expand the district but not increase the tax millage," Dupuis said. "By doing this we will increase revenues and direct some of the additional funds to hiring more ER doctors."

Dupuis said the next step is to actually go out and recruit more "primary care doctors" to locate in the parish.

"This spring a group from Gary will participate in a job fair in New Orleans where small hospitals throughout the state will talk with medical school students and young doctors looking to start practices," he said.

Dupuis said another route is to recruit local students attending medical schools and present a package which would bring them back to St. Martin Parish after medical school.

"We are going to look for young doctors who fit us," Dupuis said. "Competing with large hospitals will be a tough challenge but we'll have to if we want to survive."

"It's expensive to recruit doctors," he said. "It costs almost $25,000 to go out and attract a new doctor to the area. Competition is stiff because some major hospitals are able to purchase homes for new doctors, supply office space and offer other amenities."

Dupuis said if the hospital district is expanded and additional revenues are generated the hospital could attract doctors by offering them guaranteed salaries.

"The key is to attract our own people back to this area," Dupuis said. "Three of the doctors now in the parish are locals who returned but there are a lot more people who have become doctors who never came back."

Dupuis said medical schools are beginning to discourage students from becoming specialists and have begun encouraging students to become general practitioners.

"There is a big gap in the area of general family medicine," Dupuis said.

"We need more general practitioners and these are the very doctors we want for St. Martin Parish," he said.

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