

By Carolyn Lee

The Imperial Republican

A group of area residents plans to begin circulating a petition during the Chase County Fair this week and beyond, asking that Chase County Community Hospital board members be elected by the public in the future.

At present, board members are appointed by the county commissioners.

Former board member Sue Kinner, organizer of the drive, said, "I don't know how many people have asked why they (board members) are appointed and why don't we know when a vacancy is open?"

"If we're intelligent enough to elect school board members, who look over our children, and NRD (Upper Republican Natural Resources District) board members, who look over our water, why aren't we intelligent enough to elect a hospital board?" she asked.

Penny Teply, another member of the "unorganized group," said she was concerned that the hospital board can't seem to keep good doctors.

"Why let doctors go who are making money for the hospital?" she asked.

According to state statutes, to be put on a ballot for a vote by the public, a petition needs signatures from "freeholders," or those who own property and live in Chase County.

Kinner said that as of last fall, there were 1,321 people who qualified. Again, state statute requires the petition to contain 10 percent of those people's signatures, or 132 people.

Kinner said she aims to get at least 300 signatures.

The petitions are given to the county clerk for verification of signatures. The commissioners then call a special election, which can be held in conjunction with the spring primary election.

"The voters can decide then if they want to form hospital districts with members being elected," Kinner stated.

If the issue passes, the commissioners and county assessor would meet to form five hospital districts in Chase County. Each district needs a total taxable valuation of all taxable property of at least \$8.6 million, according to state statute.

Contacted regarding the petition, County Commissioner Don Weiss Jr. said he was in favor of it.

"I'd rather see them elected myself," he said of the board. "Appointing doesn't work well for me. If they're elected everyone gets an opinion."

Weiss also favors terms for board members, saying if a board member doesn't do his or her job, "you're off."

Jodi Thompson said if Kinner wants to circulate the petition, that's fine. Concerning an appointed board versus an elected one, Thompson said, "This is the way we've always done it. We have a very successful hospital going on right now, so I don't know why we would want to upset the apple cart at this time.

"We've got providers, are making money, getting new equipment. We're doing something right," she added, noting that area hospitals are "back where we were" several years ago.

Commissioner Chuck Vette said he's in favor of electing board members. "That would take that much burden off our shoulders," he said of the commissioners.

Vette advocates electing a board member "with an open mind instead of one with an agenda."

He added, "I think our hospital is on the right track. If we can improve on it and our board helps, that's fine."

The petition's backers plan to have petitions circulating at the Chase County fairgrounds during the fair.