

## Board in closed session nearly three hours

**By Russ Pankonin**

**The Imperial Republican**

Board members of the Chase County Community Hospital spent nearly three hours of a six-hour meeting in executive session last Thursday discussing personnel issues.

After coming out of executive session, the board took specific action relating to two personnel matters.

The first dealt with a settlement agreement with former administrator Lola Jones.

Due to the emergency nature of the item, board members amended the agenda during the meeting to act on the settlement.

The board dismissed Jones in late November. She was in an employment contract with the hospital at the time of her dismissal.

The board voted unanimously to approve the settlement. Board members included Robert Mendenhall, Eddie Nichols, Sam McNair and Merrilyn Leibbrandt.

The settlement granted Jones a single lump sum severance payment of \$150,000, less withholding for federal and state taxes. She also agreed to resign, effective Nov. 20, with the hospital accepting her resignation.

Jones worked for the hospital for 22 years, the last eight as administrator.

Following action on Jones' settlement, the board then addressed the employment of Dr. Jeff Kasselmann.

On another 4-0 vote, the board terminated Kasselmann as a member of the hospital staff, citing his failure to meet qualifications of his employment contract.

In September, the board voted unanimously to support Kasselmann's return, contingent on reinstatement of his license and meeting other licensing conditions.

Kasselmann ran a specialty clinic for pain management and served as an anesthesiologist for the hospital.

Last summer, Kasselmann checked himself into an intensive three-month program to deal with dependency and personal issues. He successfully completed the program in September and had sought reinstatement.

His state license had been reinstated but he was still awaiting approval by Medicare.

Two members of the board who voted on his return in September, Vicky Heskett and Bill Bauerle, are no longer on the board. Leibbrandt was appointed to fill one vacancy while the fifth position remains unfilled.

The board also took action to amend a Sept. 20 motion that approved pursuing a \$13 million renovation project, contingent on finding an acceptable financing option.

The board approved a motion to amend the action, saying they still plan to proceed but may further review the plans and make additional changes going forward.

### **Financial review**

In reviewing the financial report, Renee Fink, chief financial officer, said revenue is down for the past six months.

The census for the clinic and outpatient services are up but the number of in-patient admissions, scopes and procedures, oncology visits and specialty clinic visits are down.

Fink said the loss of Kasselmann's pain management clinic would account for some of the drop

in specialty clinic visits.

The hospital has taken action over the past year to address the collection of self-pay accounts.

The hospital's policy for self-pay accounts requires payment within one year.

Fink said in many cases that is not happening. She said people are making payments on their account but not enough to pay it off in a year.

Presently, there is no interest being charged against those accounts. The board suggested further review of that position.

Fink said the hospital is working with banks in Imperial and Wauneta whereby a self-pay individual can finance repayment through the bank.

The bank pays off the balance to the hospital and starts to receive payments from the self-pay individual. However, if the individual defaults, the hospital remains responsible for the outstanding amount.

Two other factors affect the hospital's bottom line, as well. Fink said they have provided \$100,000 in charity care while bad debt is around \$335,000.

Reducing the bad debt needs to remain a focused effort, board members said.

### **Public input**

Former board member Bauerle addressed the board during the public input portion of the meeting.

Bauerle said the board's failure to comply with open meetings law hurts the credibility and trust of the board.

He cited the emergency meeting held in November just prior to Jones' dismissal as administrator.

There were a minimum of three open meetings law violations at that meeting, he said.

He said those actions also violate the trust of the public.

He also urged the board to retain the services of Dr. Kasselmann.

After being involved in doctor recruitment, he said the board will put 10 times into the effort in finding a doctor versus retaining an existing member of the staff.

### **Interim administrator**

The board has not yet hired an interim administrator for the hospital but has interviewed several candidates.

Among the candidates interviewed is Gary Bieganski of Chadron. He has been involved in health care and hospital administration for some 40 years.

Until his retirement, he served as CEO for the McCook hospital.

□ *Editor's note: Prior to Bauerle addressing the board, Imperial Republican co-publisher Russ Pankonin provided each member of the board with a handbook on the Nebraska Open Meetings Act. He urged board members to become more familiar with the open meetings law, in light of the action taken by the board prior to the dismissal of Jones.*