

By Russ Pankonin, The Imperial Republican

After five years of planning, the Chase County Community Hospital board last week voted 4-1 to pursue a \$13 million expansion and renovation project.

This endeavor represents a major step forward for health care in our county and the surrounding area. It's a much-needed investment in the infrastructure of our hospital that will carry us forward for the next 20-30 years.

The current hospital was finished in 1977 at a cost of \$1.6 million. This facility has served Chase County well but a lot has changed over the past 35 years in the way health care is delivered today.

When the hospital was built, it was considered a state-of-the-art facility. It's hard to imagine that it's 35 years old but frankly, it's starting to show its age.

Did you realize there is not one bathroom in the hospital that meets requirements for handicapped accessibility?

Did you realize that the bathrooms in the patient rooms will not even accommodate a wheel chair?

Did you realize that by Dec. 31, 2012, the hospital has to have a plan in place to install fire sprinklers throughout the facility? Five years ago, the cost of that alone was \$100,000.

Did you realize that the speciality clinics which bring specialists to our hospital have outgrown current facilities? When it comes to surgeries, specialists who do their own surgery here have had to reschedule surgeries because we only have one operating room.

The improvements proposed for both expansion and renovation will insure that health care will continue to be available for many years to come. It's an investment in our future.

Health care facilities rank among the top items people look at when considering a move to Chase County. We have been fortunate in recent years to bring many young people back to our community. If we expect that to continue, then we must show that we truly believe in the future of our communities and county.

While the board has voted to pursue the project, funding issues still have to be worked out. The hospital believes it can pay for some of the cost itself but that still leaves a gap. Most likely, it will require some type of tax-supported bond issue to close that gap.

When it comes to paying some taxes for quality health care, we should be willing to do so. This hospital has not collected any county tax dollars since the bonds for the current hospital were paid off. Very few hospitals in this state can boast of that record.

We have made the best use possible of our current facility, adapting as much as possible. But, simply put, it's getting older every day. Plus, we've outgrown it. Growth is not a bad problem to have.

The planning on this project has consumed many hours by hospital board members and staff. Every option has been examined to optimize the benefits to staff, patients and taxpayers.

One solution would be to just build a brand new hospital. Communities such as Ord and Cambridge chose to do so—at a cost of between \$25-30 million. Local board members and administration didn't feel that was an acceptable option.

Just to install sprinklers and add new bathrooms to the patient rooms was going to cost more than \$3 million—not a wise use of money for what we were getting.

Instead, they've looked at how money can best be spent to bring the facility into the future, while paring down costs to less than half of what a new facility would cost.

The expansion and renovation project gives us the best of both worlds. This is a well thought out plan and deserves the support of each and every one of us in Chase County.

The risk of doing nothing puts the long-term future of our hospital in doubt. Chase County cannot afford to lose its hospital. If that were to happen, it would cast a death knell over this county that it may never recover from.

The time to act is now! Put your support behind a much needed project that will define the future of our hospital AND Chase County.