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City prepares to throw the switch and turn off electricity to Regional Gen. Hospital

LIGHTS ARE ON HOSPITAL STAYS OPEN

By Jeff M. Hardison © Jan. 10, 2019 at 3:08 p.m.

* Updated Jan. 11, 2019 at 4:08 p.m.

WILLISTON – Regional General Hospital is about to lose electric service from the City of Williston as a result of a 5-0 Williston City Council vote on Tuesday evening (Jan. 8).

*** UPDATED**

WILLISTON -- Although the Williston City Council had ordered the power to be cutoff at Regional General Hospital today (Friday, Jan. 11), a last minute reprieve has been granted.

The hospital paid part of an old electric bill, and the hospital and the city continue to work together to get over the issue of past due payments for the municipal electric service.

In a telephone interview this afternoon (Thursday, Jan. 10), City Councilman Charles Goodman explained this was not a kneejerk vote.

The hospital has accumulated an electric bill that now stands at \$75,000, Goodman said. The city has faced this issue before, he added, and City Manager Scott Lippmann has worked with RGH in an attempt to create a method for the hospital to pay its bill to the city.

It has reached a point now, however Goodman said, where Geroge Perez, the owner of RGH, is not even answering phone calls. Perez did not show up to a scheduled meeting with Lippmann, too, Goodman said.

This bad debt, which has continued to build to this point, Goodman said, has reached the tipping point or the breaking point. The city will no longer extend electric service to the hospital until the bill is paid.

The 5-0 vote on Tuesday calls for the city to turn off electric power by Friday.

Williston City Attorney Frederick L. Koberlein Jr. was instructed by the City Council to determine if the city is facing any liability for turning off power to the hospital. Given that the attorney finds the city to be within its rights as the electric service provider, it will be lights out for RGH on Friday, unless the bill is paid.

Lopez sent an open letter to all leaders in Williston as well as to leaders in Levy County.

In his letter, the hospital owner explains that he has subsidized the millions of dollars not paid by a certain number of patients.

As it stands at 3:08 p.m. on Thursday, the city is moving forward with its plan to turn off the electric service to the hospital.

Below is the letter from RGH owner Perez:

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An Open Letter to Williston Public Officials from Regional General Hospital Members of the City Council and the County Commission –

Yesterday, of the patients who were cared for at Regional General Hospital of Williston, 5 had no means of paying for services. In the last year, we have delivered millions of dollars in uncompensated care to patients and their families; we don't turn them away or threaten to cut them off, and the overwhelming majority of them are your constituents.

Who is it that fronts the money to deliver that care? That would be my family and me, and then, at the end of the year, we submit our cost reports to the Center for Medicaid and Medicare Services in order to recoup a portion of that loss. While we are currently waiting for this exercise to be complete, December is always a tough month for all rural hospitals who are already running on razor-thin margins. These reimbursements will be more than enough to satisfy our obligations.

I would like to think that the amount I have invested in this hospital and this community is evidence of my commitment; up to this point, I have been willing to go it alone. However, it hasn't been a secret that we have recently had to request extensions on various obligations while we await the start of this new year. Those extensions have been aimed squarely at satisfying our most critical expenditure – making payroll.

Some of you have appreciated our efforts and have been willing to work with us, most notably, Scott Lippman; others have been nothing short of bureaucratic and have viewed shutting down operations at the community's hospital as mere collateral damage in their quest to secure payment. A rural hospital is not "just another retail establishment"; other retail establishments don't provide millions of dollars of uncompensated critical services to the citizens of Williston every year.

It is a dangerous game to play because the satisfaction of flexing one's authority can have a negative reverberation whose return shockwaves can cost the community many, many times more than the sum total of any past due bill. There are countless rural hospitals that have shut down, and I would venture to guess that all of those communities would be willing to grant an extension if it would somehow get their hospital back.

RGH is not an anomaly or an outlier; rural hospitals across the country are in peril, and usually, when they close, it usually blindsides the community because the owners walked away when things got uncomfortable. We are different; we are fighters, and contrary to what many have chosen to believe, we are this community's biggest champion. Closing the hospital has never been an option, and we will continue to make the sacrifices necessary to get through this period of difficulty, and we are highly optimistic that we are poised to turn the corner towards sustainability.

The struggles we have faced, many which preceded us, have been well-publicized because we have committed ourselves to stick it out. Perhaps had we closed up shop in the dead of night, we too could have been held harmless from all the rumors and innuendo that have been hurled at us.

The assertion that the current distress felt by RGH results from our having realized some financial windfall by draining all of its revenue is just short of insulting. From the time we assumed operations, every bit of revenue generated has been placed back into the facility. I have personally invested more money when there were shortfalls, and I have long-since come to terms with the fact that I don't foresee recouping even a fraction of that money, and yet we are faced with having to defend ourselves against such scurrilous rumors and innuendo.

Again, there is not, nor has there ever been, any plans to close the hospital. We have a plan in place and are working towards its implementation. In order to survive, it can't be "business as usual," and change will always be met with resistance; nonetheless, kowtowing to detractors who demand that we cling to the "status quo" is a recipe for certain failure.

Please be aware, that at the very best, any other entity who took it upon themselves to rescue RGH would be faced with these same difficulties. I also know that this period has been a hardship on the staff, but I am firmly committed to keeping the doors to their hospital open so that they can continue to serve this community.

To reiterate, we are awaiting reimbursement from CMS for the millions of dollars of uncompensated care we have delivered to your constituents; at that time, we will be on firm footing. I am asking that everyone in this community, particularly its public officials, work with us to see us through this challenging period and onward to success.

**Respectfully,
Jorge Perez**