

Councilors may cease aid to clinic

Cost overruns force city to look at cutting Health Services money

By Shane Benjamin

Herald Staff Writer

The city of Durango is con-sidering pulling the plug on a clinic that was created in May 2007 when Valley-Wide Health Systems closed is doors, leaving thousands of residents without primary care.

For two years, the city and La Plata County have helped fund the Health Services Clinic to off-set the cost of treating residents on Medicaid, Medicare or who lack necessary health insurance. But this year, the city faces a \$ 465,000 overrun in its 2009 budget, and it has not budgeted for the \$ 125,000 being sought by the health clinic, said City Manager Ron LeBlanc.

“We’d have to cut some more to make that happen,” he said.

The City Council plans to meet Monday to discuss how to balance next year’s budget. LeBlanc will present three pack-ets – or three options – to bal-ance the budget, and only one will include funding for the health clinic, he said. No public hearing is scheduled.

The clinic, which operates at a loss, is overseen by Mercy Region-al Medical Center. The clinic opened in May 2007 to serve senior citizens and those who were dis-placed by Valley-Wide’s closure. Unlike the city, the county plans to appropriate \$125,000 to support the clinic in 2009.

In a letter to the City Council, county Commissioner Joelle

See ***Clinic, 12A***

Continued from 1A

Riddle urged councilors to match the county's contribution. "As we know, costs of an emergent medical-care crisis can often lead to a personal finan-cial crisis that ultimately devas-tates a family," she wrote. "Pre-ventative primary care helps to avoid those catastrophes, and in these economically challenged times, there is no better invest-ment in our community."

But LeBlanc said it is highly unusual for municipalities to fund health programs, especial-ly primary care. Of the 271 cities in Colorado, only 14 fund health programs and none funds primary-care programs, he said.

"Health care is a national is-sue, and to expect the city to be part of that solution is not real-istic," he said.

City Councilor Leigh Meigs seemed to agree.

"It's very much out of the or-dinary," she said. " When this occurred it was as a stopgap measure; it was temporary."

In order to prevent immedi-ate harm to the Health Services Clinic, Meigs said a compro-mise might be possible, where-by the city would fund part of request.

In 2008, the Health Services Center served more than 2,900 patients and provided about 6,800 visits. Mercy expects the clinic to serve more than 3,300 patients in 2009 and provide more than 7,600 visits.

If the city doesn't contribute, the clinic could face a turbulent road to becoming a sustainable health-care provider, said George Sprinkel, chief financial officer with Mercy.

" We're not at a point where we think we have to close the clinic," he said, "but it does give us pause to consider the short-term viability of that clinic."

Mercy CEO Kirk Dignum said he is sympathetic to the tough economic times, which also affect the city and the coun-ty budgets, but he remains hopeful the city will fund the Health Services Clinic.

"We've been told it's going to be a tough year, so I'm not sure we're optimistic, but we're still hopeful," he said.

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