

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. This is Jim Burke with your local news and commentary for Friday, December 27, 2024.

From the *Peninsula Daily News* this week: When Olympic Medical Center (OMC) announced it would begin exploring a partnership with another healthcare system as a possible solution to its financial challenges, it attracted significant public interest about the future of the independent public hospital. Five of the six speakers at a commissioners meeting last week expressed concern about OMC merging with a faith-based system – particularly a Roman Catholic provider like Providence or Virginia Mason Franciscan Health – that they said would place limits on care and curtail healthcare choices, not expand them.

Mary Wegmann said December 18 that she opposed any affiliation with a Catholic system. She said, “The community needs to understand that if OMC becomes Catholic-affiliated, all physicians having admission privileges at the hospital must abide by the Catholic bishops’ directive to care – even in their private medical practices discussing abortion, sterilization, transgender care or death with dignity. I consider this a restriction on physicians’ freedom of speech and a terrible loss of potential medical information.”

Pat Willits, 82, said the advanced directive she had created with her family and attorney would not necessarily be followed if OMC partners with a Catholic system. Willits quoted from “The Ethical and Religious Directives of Catholic Health Care,” which provides moral guidelines for providers.” Willits read, “The institution, however, will not honor an advance directive that is contrary to Catholic teaching...In principle, there is an obligation to provide patients with food and water, including medically assisted nutrition and hydration, for those who cannot take food orally. This obligation extends to patients with irreversible conditions, e.g., the persistent vegetative state, who can reasonably be expected to live indefinitely if given such care.”

Willits was quoting from “The Ethical and Religious Directives of Catholic Health Care,” which provides moral guidance for providers. Peggy Sanders gently pushed back on automatically rejecting any merger with a Catholic system. “It is important OMC give equal consideration to all potential partners,” she said. Sanders told the board, “I want to encourage you to look at the broadest spectrum of management options.” She pointed out that Providence and Virginia Mason Franciscan Health have been serving the area for more than 100 years. St. Michael Medical Center in Silverdale, which delivers critical cardiac care, is part of Virginia Mason Franciscan Health. Sanders said, “I think it would be most unfortunate if we take those facilities, which our community has confidence in, off the table.”

The speakers agreed that keeping the exploration process transparent and the community apprised of its progress are important. Board president Thom Hightower said the board is committed to listening to feedback, comments and perspectives. He said, “We are at the very beginning of this process and no decisions have been made...The partnership exploration process is one of the several paths that we are pursuing to achieve the goals of preserving access to local care for patients and ensuring team members and jobs are supported and serving the community of the North Olympic Peninsula by maintaining the breadth and depth of the services we offer today.”

Olympic Medical Center has said a partnership with another health system is just one possible solution to its financial woes. It lost a combined \$45.7 million in 2022 and 2023, and it is forecast to lose money in 2024 and 2025. Hospitals across the state lost a cumulative \$3.8 billion in 2022 and 2023, according to the Washington Hospital Association.

Monday, January 6 at 9:45 during the Jim B. Show here on KPTZ, we will broadcast the Public Health Report to the BOCC in Jefferson County. Public Health Officer for Clallam and Jefferson Counties Dr. Allison Berry and Director of Emergency Management for Jefferson County Willie Bence will answer listener questions, but only if you send them in! Your deadline is one week from today, January 3 at Noon. Write to contactus@kptz.org by next Friday at noon to have your public health questions answered by Willie Bence or Dr. Allison Berry.

KPTZ 91.9 FM broadcasts your local news Monday through Friday at noon and 5pm and at noon on Saturday. You can contact us at news@kptz.org. This is Jim Burke. Thanks for listening.