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## Community forum planned for Sharon Hospital

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By Cynthia Hochswender

SHARON — Sharon Hospital has released its financial statements for the fiscal year ending Sept. 30 2016.

After a modest profit in 2015 of \$460,847, the statement shows a loss of \$871,850 for 2016.

Chief Financial Officer Christian Bergeron and Chief Executive Officer Peter Cordeau met with The Lakeville Journal to go over the numbers. Although both executives seemed slightly weary, especially after several months of filing papers relating to the upcoming merger with HealthQuest, they remain upbeat about the hospital.

“I’ve never been more confident about the future of the hospital,” Cordeau said. “We’ve identified the areas that need repair. We’re stopping the bleeding and have identified areas for growth.”

Although it seems to be somewhat exhausting, especially in addition to the already challenging task of remaking Sharon Hospital and its staff, the planned partnership with New York state’s HealthQuest and a return to nonprofit status is expected to bring benefits.

Before that can happen, a few hurdles remain. First, on March 16 from 4 to 6 p.m. at Town Hall in Sharon there will be a community forum on the HealthQuest plans. Residents of all area towns, including those in nearby New York state, are encouraged to attend and ask questions.

On April 15, there will be a public hearing at 4 p.m. at Sharon Town Hall.

The document governing the new partnership is called a certificate of need and it can be found online at [www.ct.gov/dph/lib/dph/ohca/conapplications/2016/16\\_32132\\_con.pdf](http://www.ct.gov/dph/lib/dph/ohca/conapplications/2016/16_32132_con.pdf); <sup>[2]</sup> and [www.ct.gov/dph/lib/dph/ohca/conapplications/2016/16\\_32133\\_con.pdf](http://www.ct.gov/dph/lib/dph/ohca/conapplications/2016/16_32133_con.pdf) <sup>[3]</sup>.

The first document is 920 pages, the second is 675.

In spite of the rigors of the application, the hospital administrators are making shifts in the way the hospital is staffed. In recent years, key services were shifted from in-house staff to outside providers. Two key areas were the emergency department and the oncology department (which closed down recently when several Sharon oncology doctors retired and Smilow decided to end its Sharon operation). Now they want to concentrate on in-house staffing.

Cordeau and Bergeron feel it makes financial sense to rely on in-house physicians, but they also feel it provides better medical care. Having local doctors provide care allows community members to get to know who is caring for them; it also creates greater consistency of care.

Although there is not yet a plan for a new oncology center, the administrators are working hard on returning that service to Sharon.

As for the loss on the financial statement for last year, Bergeron said that it falls mainly into four categories: bad debt (patients who don't pay their bills), an increase in the already-high state provider tax, fees to outside providers of professional services and what Bergeron described as a "challenging reimbursement environment," with the state pulling back from helping pay for upgrades in areas such as new technology and property infrastructure.

"The numbers are not a surprise," Cordeau said. "The loss was anticipated."

To balance out the losses, he said, the hospital now needs to increase the number of patients it sees in the coming 18 months.

Joining HealthQuest will help with that, as it will make it easier for New York state patients to come to Sharon for care.

The administrators also believe that adding specialists to the Sharon Hospital market will allow EMTs and ambulance operators from New York state to feel more comfortable bringing their patients here, where there is a shorter wait time in the emergency department, instead of taking them to larger hospitals such as Vassar or Northern Dutchess.

"And we want to give them confidence that the patient can be cared for appropriately in the ED and not require an additional transfer to Vassar or NDH," Cordeau said.

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