

## New hospital needed, officials tell BOC

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When an ambulance pulls up to the Morgan Memorial Hospital in Madison, the patient is brought into the emergency room through a single door.

There are no oversized double doors activated by motion detectors like those at major, or modern, hospitals.

Walk-in patients to the ER and others going in the hospital must enter one of two mobile home structures next to the building.

At Tuesday's meeting of the Morgan County Commission, hospital CEO Ralph Castillo said more than 8,000 people went to the ER in the 12 months ending March 31, 2015. Most of them were in need of urgent care.

But his bigger message was that Morgan Memorial Hospital is also in need of urgent care.

"Our local community hospital is at a crossroads," Castillo said. "We have served this community for over 55 years and made a difference in many, many lives."

He told commissioners a new \$35 million hospital needs to be built to replace the 25-bed facility that opened in 1961.

"We are a major economic engine for this county. We have secured an exceptional clinical collaboration partner in Athens Regional Medical Center, and (it has) committed to providing a host of specialists at a new facility.

"And they have made it clear that the clinical collaboration cannot move forward without a replacement hospital being built in a timely manner."

Castillo says a complete updating of everything from the size of patient rooms and surgical areas to laboratory and imaging facilities and state of the art equipment is necessary to keep the hospital competitive.

Terry Evans, chairman of the Morgan Memorial Hospital Authority, told commissioners hospital officials and outside experts have spent a lot of time researching the options for updating the current facility or building a new hospital. He said the only practical way is with new construction.

Evans said the hospital needs \$1-million a year in funding from the county.

For fiscal year 2015, the county commission is spending \$750,000 to fund the hospital.

But Evans said, over the past 17 years, the county has given the hospital an average of \$925,000 a year so this would only be an increase of \$75,000.



The Entrance

The entrance to Morgan Memorial Hospital is a modular unit attached to the facility.

Both Evans and Castillo said they need the county's help to secure a HUD FHA 242 insured loan that would provide lower interest rates and have the backing of the federal government.

The county would not be responsible for the loan if the hospital were to default.

Right now, the hospital is approximately 34,000 square feet and has created 174 direct and indirect jobs, according to Castillo.

The new hospital would be twice the size and add another 84 direct or indirect jobs. Castillo said the hospital has an offer to donate land for a new facility in Morgan County.

"We have good recreational activities. We have good roads and bridges. We have a good jail," said Sarah Burbach, vice chair of the hospital authority, at the end of the presentation.

"We have good fiscal management by the county, which has been able to attract the new farmers market and Baxter.

"We have the distinction of being a retirement destination. We have good people.

"We need to serve our good people with good health care. It's time to build a replacement hospital facility."

Commission Chairman Andy Ainslie said he sees the need for a new hospital.

"As a Cub Scout," he said, "I earned a merit badge planting pine trees on the campus of the hospital in 1961. So I guess that's how far back I go in supporting the hospital."

He asked about a public hearing on the measure and when the hospital would be prepared to present its proposal for a funding solution.

Castillo said there certainly could be a public hearing, but the hospital would need help from the county to investigate other funding options available. He gave no timetable.

District 5 Commissioner Ron Milton asked about the hospital's progress in finding a new primary care physician.

"It's a hard thing to do," Castillo responded, "to recruit a primary care physician, young or not so young, to a rural community."

But he said the hospital is "upping their game" on trying to impress prospective doctors.

There were a few other questions, and no action was taken by the commission.