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By ROBERT PIERCE

- Daily Leader

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of two articles regarding a joint meeting of the Southwest Medical Center Board of Trustees and the Seward County Commission Thursday.

Before Tuesday's vote in favor of a bond proposal, officials from Southwest Medical Center were already in the process of working on the design for upgrades to the hospital as well as that of a new medical office building.

The hospital's board of trustees met with the Seward County Commission Thursday to hear from officials from Wichita-based Health Facilities Group, the architectural firm hired to help with the project.

Prior to the presentation, SWMC President and CEO Norm Lambert spoke briefly about Tuesday's special election.

"When you've got an 82 percent margin, besides having a good product to sell, we have a lot of people in this community that support the hospital and support the community," he said.

Lambert particularly thanked the citizens for hospital improvement group, and he said the goal of that group was to get information to the people about the proposal.

“We thought we had a good project,” he said. “They needed accurate information. We had people besides myself out there presenting to various public and civic organizations. We had newspapers articles written, some editorial kinds of articles written by some unknown authors.”

Lambert said one thing he kept hearing before the bond issue was passed is how local residents appreciated the information about the project.

“It clarifies a lot of the things because rumors take over,” he said. “There was a lot of good information. 82 percent feels pretty good. I think most of us felt it was going to pass. I’m not sure we thought it would pass with that kind of a margin. Now if we can just figure out what happened with those 250 people who voted no.”

Health Facilities Vice President David Wright also praised the efforts of local citizens.

“I really congratulate you too on your effort and how organized you were,” he said. “Of all the bond issues I’ve been associated with, you guys by far have the best grassroots effort I’ve ever seen.”

Wright said hospital officials made a choice a few months ago to have his company start the first phase of design.

“They took the risk hoping the bond issue would pass in order that we would be in the position once it passed to allow us to start construction in the fall,” he said. “We think that’s one of the keys to making the project successful financially.”

Wright said the first phase of design was officially finished Thursday. Mark Crane, also of Health Facilities, then spoke of some of the items in the upgrade package beginning with the emergency department at SWMC.

“We’re really improving the emergency department, not only the way it functions but also how you get into the emergency department,” he said. “The entrance is changing.”

Crane said the upgrades will likewise include two new trauma rooms, which will be state of the art.

“We’ve got a nursing area in the center,” he said. “It also is directly accessible from the garage. It just ties everything together, including a new waiting room right off the entrance.”

A new MRI will also be added with the upgrades, as will a large reception counter near the main entrance, according to Crane.

“People will know exactly where they need to go,” he said. “They’ll check in here. The admissions office area is being completely changed from what it is now. Quite a bit larger than it is now and much more organized.”

Wright said once the project is finished, patients find their hospital experience much less confusing.

“When you walk in the front door, you’ll have a chance to really say something about who Southwest Medical Center is,” he said. “It creates a positive image when you walk in the front door. It’s not overstated, but it’ll be very nice. It’ll be comfortable. It’ll be current. It’ll be vastly improved.”

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