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By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a series of articles regarding a joint meeting Tuesday between the Southwest Medical Board of Trustees and the Seward County Commission. Other articles will discuss the specific improvements hospital officials are planning, as well as financing for the upgrades.

Southwest Medical Center opened in 1964, and the hospital has grown significantly since then.

The current hospital administration is looking for further growth in the coming months, and SWMC President and CEO Norm Lambert discussed some of that information with the facility's board of trustees and the Seward County Commission in a joint meeting Tuesday.

Lambert said growth is necessary to ensure a continued strong future for the hospital.

"The hospital board and administration has spent the last year and a half looking at planning and planning a stronger future for the hospital," he said. "Things change fast. It's kind of hard to plan when it's changing. There are some influences that are coming out of Washington, D.C. that are going to change health care even more."

Lambert said when looking at planning, the administration and board looked at the hospital's position at this point.

"Our dilemma's just like anybody else," he said. "We hate change, and yet, we want things to change, so we love it. What we want is for things to remain the same, but get better."

Hospital officials likewise looked at a vision for SWMC to be the medical center of choice for Southwest Kansas and the surrounding region.

“There are hospitals all around us,” Lambert said. “Every one of those hospitals are smaller than us. They provide less services than we do, and they look to Liberal and Southwest Medical Center to be their regional referral center, because we’re able to provide a higher level of services than many of those hospitals.”

Lambert said SWMC had almost 54,000 patient encounters last year.

“Patient encounters are any way the patient comes to the hospital, whether it’s in the emergency room, they’re admitted upstairs or they come in for surgery,” he said. “That’s almost 150 every single day of the year.”

Lambert said 86 percent of all Seward County patients come to SWMC.

“That’s a phenomenal number,” he said. “Hospitals that run 60 percent are really joyous at the number they have.”

Also in 2008, the hospital made \$3 million worth of capital improvements, including nearly \$600,000 for high definition laproscopic surgical equipment and almost \$350,000 for computer tomography imaging equipment.

“When we look at our whole group of patients that come, we’re serving a five-state area,” he said. “In reality, Southwest Medical Center is a regional medical center. It’s grown dramatically.”

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