

By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second in a series of articles regarding a joint meeting Tuesday between the Southwest Medical Board of Trustees and the Seward County Commission. Future articles will discuss the proposed costs and financing for the upgrades.

Officials at Southwest Medical Center are looking to attract new doctors to the community, but in order to do that, upgrades must be made to the hospital.

SWMC President and CEO Norm Lambert discussed some of those upgrades Tuesday with the hospital's board of trustees and the Seward County Commission.

Lambert said in 1991, a tower was built at the hospital, and much money has been spent keeping the tower and the rest of the facility running smoothly.

"We spend, on average, more than \$2 million a year in capital expenditures," he said. "Last year, we spent more than \$3 million. We spend close to \$400,000 a year in repair and maintenance."

Lambert said the amounts for both capital expenditures and maintenance are going up.

"Things are getting old," he said. "They're wearing out. In this last year, in the plant itself, we spent about a quarter of a million dollars in capital dollars. For information technology, the computer system, we spent \$250,000 this last year."

Lambert said the hospital has already spent \$3 million in part of a project, and another \$3 million will be spent in computer technology to get SWMC up to speed.

Another \$750,000 in capital was spent in 2008 in the radiology department, and Lambert said this was primarily for two pieces of equipment.

“We’ve got the first digital mammography equipment in this part of the state. That was \$360,000,” he said. “We spent almost \$350,000 on a new CT scanner.”

Hospital officials also spent almost \$850,000 for the surgery area last year, according to Lambert, and a little more than \$700,000 was spent in the medical records department, accounting and human resources.

“Half of that was paid for by the Southwest Medical Center Foundation that gave us money for that,” he said.

Lambert said the hospital is blessed to have the equipment it does.

“There’s a lot of small community hospitals that don’t even come close to what we’ve got here,” he said.

Lambert said SWMC is not just a community hospital, and there is currently an opportunity in front of the board to make it a more modern medical campus.

Liberal currently has 32 doctors in the community, and Lambert said there is still a shortage of physicians.

“We’re working on that diligently to try and recruit more doctors to the community,” he said.

Lambert said SWMC likewise has great opportunities from the business and practice side for doctors in the community.

“We need to find something that differentiates us from everybody else,” he said.

Lambert noted that 45 percent of the 32 doctors in Liberal are 60 years old or older.

“We need to start planning,” he said. “It’s a difficult process to recruit physicians to a community.”

Lambert then asked if SWMC can provide 21st century facilities in Liberal.

“What we’re proposing is we need to do some upgrades of our infrastructure,” he said. “There are parts of our infrastructure that are still part of that 1964 building. Parts of it are the 1991 building.”

Part of the proposal, Lambert said, is doing something with the hospital’s surgery center and remodeling the first floor of the tower.

“One of the things we don’t have in this community is good medical office space,” Lambert said. “The trend now is to build a medical office building on the campus attached to the hospital. It’s convenience for the patient and for the physician.”

Lambert said that convenience helps attract new doctors to the community.

“It’s one of those things that might help differentiate us,” he said.

Lambert said some of the upgrades include new air handling units, digital controls on systems, additional boilers, chillers, pumps, cooling towers, hot water heater capacity and the electrical infrastructure that goes with those changes.

He added the hospital's emergency room is also in need of remodeling.

"Part of it's just cosmetic. Part of it's flow," he said. "The nurses and the doctors sit almost in the same chair. Where's the patient confidentiality?"

Lambert talked about federal laws which govern patient confidentiality.

"We're a little edgy with that right now," he said. "The clerks and the staff behind there are just sitting on top of each other. It's a maze back there."

Remodeling the lab area in the hospital, including a new MRI, will likewise be included in the project.

"The MRI itself is going to be about \$1.2 million," Lambert said.

"That's just the instrument that goes in there."

Part of the plan is to also build a new surgery center.

"There's a lot of reasons why," Lambert said. "We were talking about building another 40,000 square feet of new space. We have a pre- surgery testing area and an education center, new waiting areas. The old surgery area on the second floor could be used for other services such

as cardiology.”

Lambert said the space for new physicians is growth for both the medical center and the community.

“We’re looking at building a medical office building,” he said. “It’s a two-story, 25,000-square foot building. Right now, we’ve proposed only to build out the first floor. It would be attached to the hospital. It should accommodate anywhere between 12 and 15 physicians.”