

Randy Tucker, “The art of what’s possible,” *The Ranger*, 2 October 2018

Accepting the demise of health care in Riverton as an inevitable reality was countered by two speakers offering solutions to the ongoing decline of services at SageWest Hospital.

Cole White, CEO of Community Health Center of Central Wyoming and Bob Kayser, board chairman of Memorial Hospital of Converse County spoke to a crowd estimated at 300 people at the Robert Peck Center at Central Wyoming College Monday evening as part of a presentation by Save Our Riverton Hospital.

Community Health Center of Central Wyoming operates clinics in Casper, Riverton and Dubois.

“Riverton is unique, no town in Wyoming or Montana of similar size does not have a fully functioning hospital,” White said. “Riverton and Dubois are important to us. Fremont County is one of the most isolated counties in America. It is important to have services that can support the entire county.”

White related how communities with populations as small as 2,500 people operate profitable hospitals in Wyoming and Montana, citing Thermopolis as a good example. He related how the average American utilizes \$11,000 annually in medical expenses, an amount equally half-a-billion dollars in annual expenditures in Fremont County.

When White related the \$500 million figure it brought audible gasps from the audience.

At present this money is largely going to Casper, Jackson, Thermopolis and Cody but could be spent here if we had an adequate hospital.

“Our goal is to improve access to primary care,” White said.

Meeting that goal hasn’t always been easy for Community Health Center. When they initially operated their clinic in Dubois it was widely disapproved of by the community.

“Dubois asked us to leave. You have to have a very poor reputation when you’re the only medical care in a town and they ask you to leave,” White said. “We learned from that and came back with a different plan.”

Kayser related the tale of a hospital on the brink of closing in Douglas and how the Converse County community rallied around their hospital changing it into a vibrant facility with nearly 50 total physicians on staff, including a dozen surgeons.

“We asked if it was a reasonable objective to have a full service hospital in Douglas,” Kayser said. “Douglas has about 10,000 people in our service area. The people on the west side of the county in Glenrock are so close to Casper that they go there.”

In contrast, Riverton has a service area estimated at 20,000 to 25,000 people.

“With that many people that hospital will be profitable,” Kayser said of a proposal to bring a community hospital back to Riverton.

Twenty years ago in Douglas there were just three doctors and 130 total employees at the hospital. The hospital was losing revenue each year and in danger of closing.

“Does this community have the grit to do this?” Kayser asked. “We approached the State Lands and Investments board and asked for a loan. They gave us \$2,000,000. We had another \$3,000,000 from the Converse County Bank but we needed \$15,000,000, We passed a bond for the remainder and redid the hospital.”

Memorial Hospital of Converse County grossed \$90 million in 2018.

“The art of what’s possible,” Kayser said. “We paid off the 30 year bonds in 10 years. All the profits from the hospital stay in Converse County. We don’t pay dividends.”

Kayser indicated the effort to create a public hospital would be a challenge but worth the effort.

Earlier it was mentioned that LifePoint employees, the company that owns SageWest, will meet with the Save Our Riverton Hospital with an arbitrator but Kayser had a warning for that procedure.

“I’d have a Plan B,” Kayser said. “I’m not as optimistic about getting anywhere with LifePoint.”