

Williamson revives debate on selling medical center

COMMENTARY BY GETAHN WARD • THE TENNESSEAN • DECEMBER 8, 2010

More than a decade after Williamson County's commissioners last shut the door on the idea of transferring ownership of the county-owned Williamson Medical Center into private hands, the debate has been revived.

Last month, county commissioner Bob Barnwell brought up the idea at a tax study committee meeting. Rogers C. Anderson, the county's mayor, was asked to gather more information, such as on the hospital's value.

Barnwell wants money from any potential sale to be used to pay down some of the county's debt, which would enable county officials to reduce the property tax rate for residents.

"My philosophy of government is that government should only do what the private sector cannot or will not do," said Barnwell, a retired certified public accountant who had worked mostly in the oil industry. "The private sector will run hospitals for you."

Charles "Chuck" Eades Sr., who served as a commissioner from 1998 to 2002 when the county commission rejected a joint venture offer from Vanderbilt University Medical Center, likes Barnwell's idea of a motion to pursue a resolution to sell the hospital.

"Bob Barnwell is one of the most intelligent people I know — the only one of the county commissioners who is a CPA," Eades said. "I would listen to him very carefully."

In a statement, Jack Walton, who chairs the county commission and also sits on the hospital's board, called Williamson Medical an asset to the county just like its library, school systems and its recreation centers.

"The county commission has, in the past, specifically stated that the hospital is not for sale," said Russell Little, chairman of the hospital's board of trustees. "We are not aware of any change in that position."

As of June 30, Williamson County had nearly \$500 million in overall debt incurred from building schools and other projects.

"Like everybody else, things are tight, but we're a AAA-rated county — the only one in the state — and that speaks for itself," David Coleman, the county's budget director said of Williamson's ability to handle debt.

The county last raised property tax rates in 2002. Even if it gets a windfall from selling the hospital, Coleman doesn't see the county reducing property tax rates but added it could keep them from going up further.

Joshua Nemzoff, a New Hope, Pa.-based hospital consultant, said the county has to weigh whether it wants to be in the hospital business or whether it wants the cash.

"Always my advice is unless your hospital has to be sold, you can't seriously be thinking about selling your hospital and giving a bunch of money to politicians to throw it away," he said.

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