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Officials say new Sask hospital to be publicly run after debate, protests

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HUMBOLDT, Sask. (CP) - After much debate and public protests, health officials have decided a new hospital to be built in a central Saskatchewan city will be run publicly, instead of by a Catholic corporation.

The Saskatoon Health Region will operate the new hospital in Humboldt, replacing the St. Elizabeth's hospital which is currently run by the Saskatchewan Catholic Health Corp.

"This was a very difficult decision for the board members at St. Elizabeth," Health Minister Len Taylor said Wednesday at the provincial legislature.

"They have provided strong, compassionate care within the walls of that hospital for a large number of years."

Taylor said board officials reviewed the circumstances and chose to ask the province to assume governance of the new hospital.

St. Elizabeth's made news last year when it stopped providing elective tubal ligations.

That prompted two doctors to quit and earlier this month about 1,500 residents turned out to a rally to raise awareness about the topic.

Taylor did not yet know if the doctors planned to return now that the hospital will be publicly run.

"It is our hope that the doctors who indicated they were resigning would in fact reconsider their decisions and that they would come back," said Taylor. "That's our hope."

St. Elizabeth's currently serves about 35,000 people from 40 communities.

Construction is to start on the new hospital this spring and will include a room for persons of all faith to pray.

Health region chairwoman Darlene Eberle praised St. Elizabeth's board for its recommendation to

relinquish control of the new hospital.

"Our advice and recommendation to the minister of health reflects our shared concern for the well-being of this community," Eberle said in a news release.

Plans are also underway to immediately begin transferring the existing hospital from a Catholic run hospital to a publicly governed facility.

Eberle said she hoped the transfer would be complete by later this year.

Jerome Strasser, chairman of the hospital's board of directors, said the board was proud of the compassionate and competent care the hospital has provided since its inception in 1911.

"We know that many people in our communities will share our sadness that, after next year, the hospital will no longer be Catholic," he said in a news release.

A poll commissioned by the health region and the St. Elizabeth board suggests that 69 per cent of people surveyed wanted the new hospital to be operated under the health region.

Nineteen per cent suggested they preferred the new hospital continue to operate as a Catholic facility.

The polling firm conducted the survey between Feb. 23-25 of 977 people living in 40 communities served by St. Elizabeth's hospital.

The health region says the poll is accurate within 3.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The health region and the board said the results of the poll was a key factor in their recommendation that the new hospital be publicly operated.

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