

Benton County asks state for \$2.7M study to build addiction recovery center



Bob Brawdy Tri-City Herald

The Washington Legislature is being asked to pay for a study to build a new substance recovery and mental health services center in Benton County which could end plans to convert the former Kennewick General Hospital downtown.

‘Standstill.’ Plans stumble to convert old Tri-Cities hospital to rehab center

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Benton County has asked the state Legislature for \$2.7 million to study building from scratch a substance abuse recovery center in Tri-Cities.

Several Tri-Cities leaders testified a week ago before the [Senate Behavioral Health Subcommittee to Health & Long Term Care](#).

The study would evaluate building a \$20 million facility on four acres that Benton County already owns.

The move puts into serious question a different proposal that many Tri-Citians thought was close to a done deal to convert an old downtown Kennewick hospital into a rehab center for substance recovery and mental health services.

The Tri-Cities is the only metro area in Washington state without a center for withdrawal management, Michelle Gerber, the president of the [Benton Franklin Recovery Coalition](#), told the subcommittee.

Gerber has been a driving force for a detox and treatment center in the area after having two adult children struggle with substance abuse. Her son died from his addiction.

Multiple studies have shown a severe lack of access to mental and behavioral health services and substance use treatment for a population of 300,000.

“I saw very many instances where the system failed people even when people have the ability to pay,” Gerber said. “It’s worse for those who can’t.”

NEGOTIATION STANDSTILL

The request to explore a different recovery center option bubbled up during negotiations in recent months between the [Kennewick Public Hospital District](#) and LifePoint Health.

The [hospital district sold Trios Health](#), including the downtown campus and a newer campus in the

Southridge area, to what is now LifePoint Health after the Trios hospital fell into bankruptcy.

The public hospital district has worked for two years on a plan to buy back the former Kennewick General Hospital campus for \$1.6 million. It would then contract with a main service provider and possibly some others to operate the center.

It currently serves as Trios Women's and Children's Hospital. But LifePoint recently announced plans to [build a new birthing center on its Trios Health Southridge campus](#) to be finished by spring 2022.

Last fall, Benton County agreed to work with the public hospital board on turning the old hospital into a rehab center after a feasibility study came back favorable.

The cost for the renovation and initial startup was estimated at \$14.9 million, compared to an estimated cost of \$20.6 million to build a new center, according to that study.

However, Benton County Commissioner Jerome Delvin told the Herald that negotiations to buy the former KGH campus have come to a standstill.

He said LifePoint wants to place deed restrictions on the services offered at the proposed Two Rivers Behavioral Health Recovery Center.

LifePoint also owns Lourdes Health, which offers mental health services.

“There are some stumbling blocks,” Delvin told the Herald. “They want to protect their interests.”

Delvin said buying and renovating the Trios property still is a possibility but the restrictions LifePoint has laid out on competitive services is a problem to effectively operate a public recovery facility.

As a result, some people involved in the project have soured on that option and an alternative choice was needed in case the issues with LifePoint can't be resolved.

Officials with Trios Health could not be reached about the issue.

NEW PROPOSAL

All parties agree that the services are sorely needed in the Tri-Cities area.

Gerber testified to legislators that the Three Rivers Behavioral Health Recovery Center would provide secure withdrawal management, inpatient care and family counseling services. And it would be an

alternative to repeat crisis calls and emergency room visits.

The study would include architectural and engineering assessments, as well as conceptual and detailed designs for the \$20 million facility.

“Our office has been very aggressive in creating drug courts and drug diversion programs,” testified Andy Miller, Benton County prosecutor. “However, one of the things we’ve learned with these diversion programs and therapeutic courts is sometimes even putting someone in jail for a few days can cause a setback.”

He testified that having a center will relieve police officers of trying to assess addiction and mental illness — and professionals at the center would provide that service.

Matt Rasmussen, Benton County’s deputy administrator, estimated the study and permit process would take 14 to 16 months for the property near the county’s canine shelter south of the Auditor’s Office annex off Canal Drive.

During that time, the county would be looking for ways to pay for the project by seeking state and federal grants, money from the cities, counties and private donors.

Construction is as many as three years away, he said.

In the mean time, negotiations on the original proposal with LifePoint could rekindle.

“We welcome two horses in the same race and one of them will come out a winner,” said attorney Lee Kerr, the hospital district’s superintendent. “The district is in support of any way that will get a recovery center here.”

Kerr said the hospital district still is moving forward in negotiating with LifePoint, as well as looking for funding.

“We see this (repurposing of the old hospital) being by far the most cost effective and most expeditious,” he said. “We still think this is the prime option for being able to accomplish the goal.”

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