Tension up as hospital officials list upgrades

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WATERBURY — A clash between Waterbury Hospital CEO Peter J. Adamo and a member of the Naugatuck Valley Project added tension to a community forum Thursday evening that otherwise ran smoothly.

During the question-and-answer session at the end of the forum, Naugatuck Valley Project member Steve Schrag criticized the amount of notice the hospital provided the community regarding the forum and demanded the hospital enter into a legally binding, written agreement to continue accepting Medicare and Medicaid payments.

“I would like to know how long you’re going to keep Medicare and Medicaid as required for nonprofits, as unfortunately under OCHA (Office of the Healthcare Advocate) you’re not required to do it after next year. Are you going to keep it forever?” Schrag asked.

“I’m having a hard time not laughing,” said an exasperated Adamo. “Seventy-eight percent of my business is Medicare and Medicaid. If I stop doing that, what am I going to do?”

“So then why don’t you put that in writing with us?” asked Schrag.

“Why would I have to put it in writing?” asked Adamo.

The exchange is the culmination of a rift that formed between hospital executives and the community group as a result of the hospital foregoing its nonprofit status to join Prospect Medical Holdings in 2016, in the face of serious financial issues.

According to hospital records, the Greater Waterbury Health Network lost $53 million over the two years before the acquisition. The Naugatuck Valley Project is concerned that once state-mandated charitable contributions and forums are no longer required, the hospital will stop providing them.

Waterbury Hospital Spokeswoman Patricia Charvat previously said the hospital would continue its community involvement after the three-year mandatory period expires.

Thursday night’s forum, which took place in a conference room in front of roughly 40 hospital officials and community members, was the first of two biannual meetings Connecticut mandated the hospital conduct when it was acquired by Prospect, which pledged to invest $55 million in upgrades to the hospital.

To that end, Mark Holtz, hospital chief operating officer, said roughly $8.7 million in investments were made during fiscal year 2017, and $14 million more are planned for fiscal year 2018. He said $5 million was spent year-to-date in infrastructure and equipment upgrades.

Among the upgrades were new anesthesia machines, portable X-ray machines, new EKG machines, new flat screen TVs and improved cable service for patients.

Holtz reported the hospital’s campus also had been improved by new energy-efficient outdoor lights, building restorations, sidewalks and guardrails, “all meant to make the campus more open and welcoming. A real change from the way we operated before.”

Dr. Joey Cosgriff reported quality-of-care updates, chief among them a 25 percent decrease in the number of falls patients suffered in the hospital, as a result of a new multidisciplinary team. She reported 50 percent fewer infections transmitted, due to improved hand hygiene, and readmissions are decreasing.

Dr. Justin Lundbye, chief medical officer, said a team of 12 hospitalists — hospital doctors who communicate with primary care doctors to understand a patient’s medical issues — is working to improve communication with primary care physicians.

He said doctors are now being placed on the same floor consistently, so staff members build a rapport with each other and with patients.

Charvat said the hospital and its network accounted for roughly $600 million in direct economic impact on the community.

Moments before his questioning by the Naugatuck Valley Project, Adamo took the floor to detail upcoming improvements, which include remodeling the labor and delivery department and a major expansion of the emergency department, which he says will double its square footage and capacity.

“That is how we touch the community every single day,” he said. “This will not be an inexpensive project.”

The Naugatuck Valley Project, echoing a complaint from the last meeting in November, said community groups are not receiving enough notice of the public forum.

Charvat said the hospital had three newspaper ads, two more than the state requires as part of the terms dictated in the Prospect acquisition.

“If you wanted to be a good neighbor, you would have called up people who you know care about what happens at this hospital,” said Schrag.

William J. Pizzuto, director of the city’s UConn campus, Waterbury Hospital advisory board member and Waterbury Regional Chamber of Commerce chairman, interjected:

“This hospital, as well as Saint Mary’s, is intimately involved with every organization that I’m involved in,” he said. “What they do, I can personally testify, is so successful I have a nursing program because of it.”