



## Proposed countywide health department lacks support of incoming board

CARL LINDQUIST *The York Dispatch*

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Bob Woods wants an answer.

Is there a future for the proposed countywide health department?

The idea, a recommendation of the YorkCounts Commission, began gaining steam in 2005.

Next year is when the York County Health Department Task Force, which Woods heads, plans to finally ask the new board of county commissioners for a decision, he said

"It's yes or no," he said. "We've done the feasibility study. We've done the business plan. We know what needs to be done."

**Bleak outlook:** The chances for an affirmative answer, at least right now, appear slim. Republican commissioner-elect Chris Reilly is opposed to the idea, and incumbent Steve Chronister is a probable "no" vote.

Commissioner-elect Doug Hoke is undecided.

Their positions aren't news to Woods, but he said the task force isn't about to give up.

The group is considering calling town meetings to create more momentum for the health department,

said Woods, executive director of the United Way of York County.

The hope is to educate more people about the need for the department to get their backing and show commissioners that a wide base of people support the idea.

The department would offer a wide range of services. It would track public health trends and also offer restaurant inspections, among other services.

It would be a go-to resource for health-related issues in the county, proponents say.

But it wouldn't be cheap.

**The cost:** A business plan presented to county commissioners calls for a \$5.4 million department with 53 employees, with limited growth only when more state and federal money becomes available.

York County taxpayers would pay about \$888,000 annually for the department after three years, according to the business plan. About \$445,000 of that includes existing public health services already run by the county, meaning taxpayers would shoulder about \$443,000 more than they currently pay.

In the first three years, donations and gifts would offset some of the costs to taxpayers. The taxpayers would also be responsible for cost-of-living increases for the 53 employees and other inflationary costs.

Woods said he isn't asking the county to necessarily increase taxes to offset the department's cost, just make room for it by shifting where they spend tax money.

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**Priorities:** "I think they have priorities coming into the new position," he said. "We need to get the health department higher on the list of their priorities."

Chronister, while applauding the task force for its work, acknowledged the creation of a new health department was low on his list of priorities.

He's more interested in looking at ways to reduce the county's public safety costs through decreasing crime, he said.

Plus, the new board will also need to find some way to end the heritage park project started by outgoing commissioners Lori Mitrick and Doug Kilgore, he said.

"For now (the health department is) not high up on the list," he said. "That doesn't mean Steve Chronister thinks it's a bad idea. It's just not a high priority now."

He's likely to vote against the health department unless the task force can show him a wider base of support and greater need for the department, he said.

**New commissioners' views:** Hoke hasn't made a decision on the idea, he said, because he needs to learn more details about the proposal and see where the public stands on the idea.

Reilly said he's opposed to the idea and suggested the private sector take the lead on the project.

If specific needs are identified, such as programs to deal with teen pregnancy, maybe the county can take a look at those down the road, he said.

"I just don't see the need for it (a county health

department) at this juncture," he said. "I think there are other priorities for the county."

If the new board doesn't approve the health department, Woods isn't sure what will happen to the proposal

"Maybe we take a break," he said. "That's going to be up to the committee."

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