

By KEN WOODLEY

FARMVILLE — Centra Health has invested far too much in Southside Community Hospital for Centra SCH to be anything but the best community hospital it can possibly be, the hospital's President and CEO, Dr. Gwen Eddleman, told Farmville's Town Council.

Dr. Eddleman vigorously refuted rumors addressed by council member Dr. Edward I. Gordon that physicians are leaving and there is no plan to recruit replacements because Centra Health wants to create a patient conveyor belt to its Lynchburg hospitals and that anyone needing to be admitted for more than 23 hours would be sent to Lynchburg, rather than admitted in Farmville.

"I think the folks who may feel that way, Dr. Gordon, are perhaps misinformed," Dr. Eddleman told Dr. Gordon during a reconvened meeting in December.

"I think so," Dr. Gordon agreed, "but they're just rumors I wanted to address."

The discussion came as Dr. Eddleman was making a presentation on the progress made in patient volume and quality of care at Centra SCH since the 2006 affiliation with Centra Health (see accompanying page one story).

"I will tell you from the day I arrived my objective here was to create and sustain the highest quality of healthcare that we could for the citizens of this community," Dr. Eddleman said. "However we do that, that's the overall objective."

Dr. Eddleman said she is aware of only two physicians leaving and there is already active recruitment to replace one, with plans to fill the other vacancy too. The key to the growing success at Centra Southside Community Hospital is the affiliation with Centra Health, she noted. And Centra Health has a vested interest in the sustained success of the Farmville hospital.

"One of the things I heard very clearly (from the community) in the first two years I was here was... 'you need to hook yourself up with somebody else; you need to brand yourself with somebody else... You need to do that to really enhance the credibility of our local organization.' I think our volumes speak to the fact that our community has responded to what we've been able to deliver, in terms of quality health care. Any decisions we're making are just going to build on that. It's not going to decrease that. "Is our relationship with Lynchburg going to be closer as we go through the next 10 years? I think so. I don't think that's a bad thing. That's a good thing," she said.

Dr. Eddleman noted that the physicians being recruited as hospitalists—physicians who provide care while someone is admitted into the hospital—for Centra SCH are expected to live in Farmville.

"We intend for them to live in Farmville. As a matter of fact, anytime one of those hospitalist candidates is interviewed... I'm a part of that interview. They come down, they have lunch, I put them in my car and I force them to drive around for about an hour and a half and give them the community tour.

"So there is no intent to just staff all of our physician needs out of Lynchburg. That just isn't reasonable. The physicians in Lynchburg are not real excited about driving to Farmville every day to work. So I think the folks who may feel that way, Dr. Gordon, are perhaps misinformed.

Dr. Gordon answered, "I think so but they're just rumors I wanted to address. The other (rumor) is that this (Centra SCH) is going to become, if you're going to be admitted for something for more than 23 hours you're probably not going to be here in Farmville, you're going Lynchburg."

No way, according to Dr. Eddleman, who noted the investment made by Centra in SCH and Centra's expectation of a return on that investment.

"Centra Health did make a huge financial investment in this hospital at the initial affiliation and you just saw some of the things that investment is paying for. None of the accomplishments we just talked about today would be possible without that money. It's cost a lot of money," Dr. Eddleman said.

"The only way, because of the distance, the only way that Centra gets a return on that investment is if they grow the volumes in this hospital," she explained. "The more patients we have in this hospital, the more patients we have who need cardiac surgery, heart surgery, brain surgery, those high level...health care needs—that's the work Centra wants to come to them instead of going to (hospitals in Richmond area). That's the only way they get a return on their investment."

Rumors that Centra SCH might become nothing more than an emergency care facility are just wrong, according to Dr. Eddleman.

"If this just became a Band-Aid station," she stressed, "it would become too expensive for them to continue to have a relationship with (Farmville). So, realistically and theoretically, that concept that some folks have it just doesn't work, and that's not our intention."

Dr. Eddleman noted her belief that "we've done a good job of growing the volumes here. See what's happened since '06. We're pretty well cranking. I see more people in the community, even in Nottoway County and down in Lunenburg County, who have come to me and said, 'I went to Lynchburg for this and so and they were really good to me over there; I got good care and I'm going back again.' So folks seem to be satisfied."

Town Council member David E. Whitus focused on Centra Health's investment. Whitus, a former banker, said,

"I think a key word in what you said is that Centra made an investment. And I think some people are confused between an investment and a donation. When you make an investment you expect a return on that investment. Centra made an investment and rightfully expects a good return on that investment. They didn't make a donation."

Dr. Eddleman said Whitus made a good point, and she went on to remind Town officials about the affiliation agreement's inclusion of local members on the Centra Health Board of Directors.

"In terms of things that impact us relative to Centra," she said, "on the Centra board our affiliation agreement gives our local board three voting seats on the Centra Board and one seat on the executive committee. Ladies and gentlemen, I've been a part of a lot of deals in the last 25 years—I have never seen somebody give millions of dollars to you and say, 'Now I'm going to give you three votes on the board.' I've never seen that happen before. So it's a pretty unusual relationship."

"I think we are blessed to have found a partner," Dr. Eddleman said, "that shares the same value and vision that this hospital has always stood for. So I think it's a relationship that's working out well." Nobody on Town Council expressed any disagreement with her conclusion.