

Now, the Other Side of the Hospital Move Story

No one would ever accuse me of being overly solicitous to the Susquehanna Health System, or carrying their water in any major public debate, but perhaps there is another side to the story concerning what many believe is the inevitable move out of the city of Williamsport.

Would it be bad for the Susquehanna Health System to move out of the city, or might it even be good? The usual fear mongering is that if Susquehanna Health System moves out of the city, we will lose jobs, tax money, and the city will continue its long-term slide into the abyss of total failure.

On the other hand, people have been complaining for years that the Williamsport Hospital is sucking up properties, which are then taken off the tax rolls, while really employing less people thanks to the efficiencies of scale and modern technology. Let's face it, if the Susquehanna Health System moves five to fifteen miles outside of the city, people from the city are going to have a new and modern health care system five or ten minutes away from their homes. Undoubtedly, there will be high speed access to the hospital, helicopter service, and who knows, maybe we'll even bring the railroads back.

On the other hand, what would happen to those large properties now occupied by Susquehanna Health System if they move away? The city is desperate for lower and middle class housing, whether in the form of apartments, condos or homes. The old Williamsport Hospital and Divine Providence could be converted to lovely, multi-use areas with park grounds, mixed types of single and multi-family dwellings, and for once, some modern housing where people would really want to live. That would immediately make the city more desirable as a place of residence, and would add immeasurably to the tax base for both the city and the schools. The question ought to be asked, where would those people come from and why would they want to live in the city if they had to commute out to the hospital? This is a legitimate question, and of course the development of the old hospital areas would only work if there was a cooperative effort by and between the city, the vacating hospitals, and the county. Good, affordable housing might keep people in the city who are now fleeing to all the surrounding townships for a multitude of reasons, including the expansion of large quasi-public entities such as the hospital and the colleges.

The Susquehanna Health System does not seem to be too perturbed by spending \$500 million on a new campus, as opposed to just a couple hundred million to fix up its old facilities. Where does all this money come from? It

comes from you and me. It comes from high costs for health care insurance. It comes from the employers in the city. The money, of course, will come from bonds that the municipalities will underwrite and our children and grandchildren will pay off. Maybe, just maybe, the \$500 million ought to be used to reduce the cost of health care insurance, and think of all the employers and workers who would come rushing in to the city to work in this affordable health care community. Don't worry, that suggestion will never be followed and will never happen.

There are other good reasons for Susquehanna Health System to move out of the city. Most of the doctors and high-paid officials do not live in the city anymore. The bigwigs at Susquehanna Health System do not want to send their kids to Williamsport Schools, which are 40-50 percent diverse and where the average student is so mobile that it is a rare class that will keep all its students together for an entire year. Crime, poverty, and fear have driven the highest taxpayers out of the city already. I still live in the city, but when I drive new recruits around the area, I ask myself, who is building all these \$500,000 to \$1 million dollar homes in the "suburbs," only a few miles outside of the city limits? Will spending \$200 or \$300 million by the hospital increase the tax base **in the city**, or make anybody want to live **in the city**? The answer is obviously "no."

Kissing the Susquehanna Health System goodbye, but keeping them close enough between Williamsport and Muncy to make the new \$500 million hospital complex accessible, modern and efficient, might be the best thing for the city.

The comparison is often made with Crown America Corporation that chose to build the mall at Halls Station because of the shortsightedness of local business and government. That is the truth. I remember well when our city business neighbors wanted no part of the horrid mall in the area that is now "Via Bella." There are some good similarities to that situation, except for the fact that Crown America is a tax paying entity and would have done good for the city had it been located in the city for that reason alone. Also, Crown America was going to relocate in a portion of the city that desperately needed rehabilitation and was in essence either crumbling, blighted or unused.

This column is not an argument either for kicking out the Susquehanna Health System or discouraging the wonderful expansion of the colleges. Far from it. The point of this somewhat tongue-in-cheek article is to point out that if the Susquehanna Health System is hot to trot out of the city and to give up all which the city can provide, there can be a silver lining if proper plans are made and a forceful approach is taken.

The Susquehanna Health System located 777 Rural Avenue, Williamsport, PA 17701, is going to spend the hard earned money of the

government and its patients somewhere, and the question is, what will the city do to ensure its own long-term economic health?

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