

Op-ed: More on hospital HVAC difficulties

By Aaron Edwards, MHPA

11/8/17
View

I am writing to provide our community with some additional information on the hospital HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning) system as we received a few calls from concerned citizens following the publishing of the View Extra article "HVAC Problems." My hope is to put the scope of the problem into perspective by answering a few frequently asked questions.

What areas of FCPHD have been affected?

Only the hospital building. The Republic Clinic and Klondike Hills Assisted Living Community did not experience difficulties this past winter and are able to withstand our community's cold winters.

What exactly is wrong?

The VRF (Variable Refrigerant Flow) heat system (or in simple terms a heat pump system) was originally designed to have backup heat during especially cold weather just like most homes with heat pumps. However, this backup system was never installed for reasons still being debated at the present.

At what temperature does the system begin to struggle?

Last year in early December we discovered the problem when temperatures were dipping below zero for extended periods of time.

Why is it taking so long to fix the system?

A simple question, which isn't so simple to answer. Probably the single largest reason for the delay is the length of time it has taken to get the attention of the Washington State Department of Enterprise Services and the company that designed and installed the system. The DES was responsible for helping to facilitate the contracting and work of the program originally intended to replace our aging boiler heat system, and save on energy costs each year. Both of these entities had to first be con-

including what to do about the problem and who will pay for it. Thank you to Senator Shelly Short and her staff for all they have done to help the FCPHD in this process!

Will the hospital be prepared for winter?

Last winter we were provided temporary supplemental heat from the contractor which, while not perfect, did protect us during some very cold days. We hope not to rely on that again this winter season but rather we hope work on a more permanent fix will begin very soon.

Who will pay for these fixes?

This week (the week of October 30th) the DES, the original contractor and a new contractor that has potential solutions are continuing ongoing meetings to finalize what needs to be done, and who pays for it. The DES appears to be fully on our side and working towards a solution that greatly benefits FCPHD. I will do my best to keep the community posted on this difficult step in the process.

What did you mean when you said in the article, "we could be faced with out-moving hospital patients and an emergency room closure. This would be catastrophic for the community & FCPHD"?

While we believe the likelihood of an emergency department closure is very unlikely—we will fight to keep our ED open for the protection of the community—at present we do have 12 long-term care patients that call the hospital home and for their safety we must consider the possibility of moving them to warmer facilities should we not maintain proper temperatures. We also frequently have inpatients which require adequate heating to be comfortable and safe. Let me be clear, moving patients is absolutely a last resort; this hospital is a safety net for both the physical and economic health of the community and

a mock winter evacuation drill which included institutions such as Holy Family Hospital, Mt. Carmel Hospital, St. Joseph's Hospital, Newport Hospital, Ferry County EMS, Curlew EMS, Ferry County Dispatch, Rural Resources, Republic School District and various skilled nursing facilities in both Colville and Tonasket which are prepared to provide assistance. Again, we hope we never have to actually evacuate but we must be prepared. We believe we are ready to safely and efficiently evacuate should the necessity arise.

The purpose of this article is to better inform the community as to what is going on with the hospital's HVAC challenges. While this certainly isn't an ideal situation we are making progress towards a resolution, and I do believe we will soon prevail and have adequate heating so our employees and community are safe and comfortable for years to come.

There are many exciting and positive things going on in the district that the community can be proud of, such as the return of Jane Jacobson, ARNP to the Republic Clinic, new clinic hours soon, a possible new visiting orthopedic surgeon, and a new provider staffing plan we believe will improve ED and inpatient care to name a few. We look forward to putting this challenge behind us and to a

long future serving the community. Please join us at one of our monthly FCPHD board meetings to hear more and have any further questions answered. We thank you for your support; we cannot continue to operate without you!

Aaron C. Edwards is superintendent and CEO of Ferry County Public Hospital District #1.