

CEO promises more local control over RMC

By Jay Jones
Staff Reporter

CONYERS — Signature Hospital Corp. President and CEO Charles Miller said accountability and quality of service to the community are among the keys that will make Rockdale Medical Center successful after his company takes ownership of the facility.

During an appearance at the Conyers Rotary Club and later during an interview at the Citizen offices, Miller sought to calm fears that the 53-year-old public hospital would lose its identity as a community resource. He assured Rotary Club members that the hospital will succeed only if it serves the community, and the local board, county hospital authority, physicians and hospital employees will have a significant role in running the hospital.

“We are not smarter than they are,” said Miller in explaining Signature’s management style of allowing greater local authority in operating the company’s hospitals. “The only difference is that we have a wider depth of experience in the hospital business to where we can counsel and offer guidance whenever problems crop up that all hospitals have dealt with at one time or another.”

However, Miller added Signature will not “abdicate” complete responsibility to the local hospitals it owns. Signature will hold monthly meetings with hospital management to assess performance. He said budgets will be set and local hospital officials will be held accountable.

Signature and the Rockdale County Hospital Authority are moving forward on the \$90 million sale agreement of the hospital. The sale could be completed by the end of the year after a public hearing next month and a ruling by Georgia Attorney General Thurbert Baker whether the transaction meets state law. Signature already owns four hospitals in Texas, Arkansas and West Virginia. Miller said RMC would be the company’s largest hospital and referred to the facility as “our flagship hospital” if the sale is completed. The company has offered to place a Rockdale County resident nominated by the hospital authority on its corporate board of directors. The proposed nine-member RMC board of directors, the group that would have direct oversight of the hospital, will have five local individuals — three named by the authority and two physicians.

When asked how he thought Signature could be more successful running a hospital when a local nonprofit entity failed, Miller said it was a matter of money. He said single-entity hospitals like RMC are finding it more and more difficult to stay competitive because of the capital they must raise to fund capital improvements. He said the drive to acquire the latest medical equipment was akin to a “technology arms race” by hospitals trying to stay on top to attract patients and doctors.

Miller said the potential for RMC is great and largely untapped because of the lack of funds available to upgrade equipment and to properly market the hospital.

Miller said Signature has agreed to keep a list of what he described as “bread and butter” services available at RMC for 10 years — services that almost all hospitals perform. He explained that cutting any of those would risk losing patients in other areas.

Signature has promised to spend \$32 million over the next five years on capital improvements under the RMC agreement. Miller said in addition to the standard services, hospitals typically offer services that are unique to a community. At the Signature-owned hospital in Tampas, Texas, for example, diabetes is emphasized because the disease is prevalent in that community’s large Hispanic population.

“For the aging population, you look at top two to three medical conditions and it tends to be cardiology, cancer and chronic diseases, so you kind (of) have to gear up for that,” he said. “The other thing, and I’ve not really focused on this, did you know obesity is the new smoking? It has replaced smoking as a health problem, so we’re looking at bariatrics programs, not at all of the hospitals because it’s not suitable and some don’t have physicians who have the expertise to do them. But I’ve seen these programs before and that it has to be structured correctly.”

Addressing indigent care, Miller said Signature has made small steps to control cost in that area. He told the Citizen that in most cases, the approach to indigent care in many emergency departments is avoiding lawsuits.

Miller said there is opportunity to find ways to weed out abuse of the emergency-room services and to determine who truly needs to be admitted to the hospital. In referring to a recent study, he said that at one of Signature’s hospitals, 80 percent of non-emergency patients admitted to hospitals was justifiable. Miller said it’s a difficult task, but Signature was looking for a way to cut down on costs of the other 20 percent. Jay Jones can be reached at jay.jones@rockdalecitizen.com.

