

Assisted living facility in doubt

With Genesis future unclear, project may be delayed

By **MATTHEW McCORMICK**
Staff Writer

The uncertain future for Genesis HealthCare at the county nursing home may stall a two-year-old effort to build an assisted living facility in Sullivan County.

"I want the nursing home stabilized and an agreement on where we're going for the next few years before we take on an initiative like that," Commissioner Ben Nelson, speaking at the board's monthly meeting Tuesday afternoon, said of the proposed facility.

The county has been working on plans for the assisted living building since 2004, when it received a \$12,000 state grant to study its feasibility. Since then, officials have spent another \$120,000 on marketing, business plans, focus groups, a project coordinator and an architectural team, County Manager Ed Gil de Rubio said.

Gil de Rubio said he had expected to begin soliciting down payments for the proposed \$7.9 million, 41-apartment facility early next year and to break ground in 12 months.

But that was before last week's election clouded the future of the county's relationship with Genesis HealthCare, a nursing home consultant that has helped manage Sullivan County Health Care since January 2005.

Nelson and commissioner and board chairman Don Clarke supported extending the county's contract with Genesis when it runs out in June 2007.

But on Jan. 3, Clarke will be replaced by Commissioner-elect Jeff Barrette, a Claremont Democrat who captured the two-term incumbent's seat last Tuesday.

Both Barrette and Commissioner Ethel Jarvis, a fellow Democrat who was re-elected, made ending the county's contract with Genesis and bringing in a public administrator a centerpiece of their campaign.

The same was true of the Democratic candidates for the Statehouse from the county. Democrats took 12 of 13 spots in the Sullivan County delegation, which approves the county commissioners' budget.

Those election results could mean changes at the nursing home next year, and if it does, the facility will not be the only challenge the commissioners face in 2007.

Also on their plate will be much-needed improvements to the county jail. In addition to overcrowding problems, an ongoing needs assessment of the facility has found that it lacks trained personnel.

Nearly all of the jail's residents have substance abuse problems and almost a third suffer

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from mental disabilities, Gil de Rubio said.

With two of the county's existing facilities expected to require significant attention, Nelson said it might be wise to put plans for the construction of a new building on the back burner.

"We've got two balls in the air," he said. "I don't think we can throw a third one up there."

But Jarvis said that removing Genesis from the nursing home would not cause enough upheaval to sidetrack the assisted living project.

"I think we should go forth with it if it's agreeable to the new commissioner," Jarvis said Wednesday.

Barrette said that he too hopes to move forward with the facility, which he said will help address Sullivan County's aging demographics. By 2010, the senior population of the county is expected to increase by 18 percent, according to a business plan completed in June.

"If we can get a plan together by January or February with what's going to happen with Genesis, we could get any plans in place (for the assisted living facility) before the budget is in place," Barrette said. "It's definitely a priority."

Whatever the commissioners decide to do, Gil de Rubio said they need to decide it soon. While the county is committed to moving forward, aspects of the project, such as commissioning conceptual drawings, just how far Nelson, Jarvis and Barrette wish to go with the facility will have implications for their budget.

The county manager will begin pulling together that document in the coming months.

"Now is the time to have this discussion," he said.

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