

Selling Latah Health Services to Gritman Medical Center is a Wise Idea

By Nick Gier

When I often despair about how our current President has failed us, I try to remember the positive things about our political system. One of them is the grassroots civic activism that has always made this country great.

I've had first hand experience with the leaders of the Grassroots Group for Gritman, who have been organizing a Yes vote to sell Latah Health Services (LHS) to Gritman. They embody every good quality that makes our democracy work.

As the first nursing home in Idaho, LHS offered wonderful service to the people of Latah County for 50 years. It is the legacy of Grace Wicks, county commissioner and the Grand Lady of the Palouse for many years.

With its policy of accepting every applicant, something that more and more for-profit facilities cannot do, LHS started running a deficit. Over the years basic maintenance and upgrading of the facility were also neglected.

In 2005 the LHS Board hired Valley Vista to operate assisted living and skill nursing, but, because of mounting debt, Valley Vista closed the skill nursing section in September of last year. Next, Infinity Rehab pulled out of physical therapy and closed the therapy pool.

The pool users quickly and effectively organized and insisted that the pool remain open. Greg Mann, chair of the LHS board, worked diligently to find someone to take over the pool. Gritman graciously stepped in, addressed the most pressing problems quickly, and significantly improved the operation of this essential county health service.

When the LHS board reluctantly decided to dissolve its corporation, the County Commissioners went to Gritman and asked them to take over the facility. Gritman responded that it would, but only if the reversionary clause was removed, something that requires a vote of the county's citizens.

Gritman has grand plans for a county wellness center on the property. Examples of additional programs include a cancer resource room, a kidney dialysis center, and a clinic for indigent health care.

Gritman will also use the space to expand Hospice of the Palouse and extend its very popular Adult Day Health, a new concept for seniors and others who need help to stay at home rather than enter a nursing facility.

Gritman has also committed itself to bringing back assisted living if it can find a reliable operator to do so. Furthermore, it might be possible to offer the county office much needed space in the complex's west wing.

In a letter to the *Daily News* (Jan. 25), Greg Mann, in his argument for a Yes vote, made two important points. First, he reminds us that the property will not actually leave our hands, as it transfers from the county to a publicly owned nonprofit hospital with 100 years of service to the community.

Second, the people of the county will not lose 50 years of taxpayer investment, and, even though Gritman will pay only \$1, it will have to put up over \$1 million to upgrade the facility and then finance all the new services.

Some say that the property is worth a lot of money and that the county should sell it to the highest bidder. I believe that this is wrong and short-sighted. The value of a wellness center with no taxpayer obligations is far greater than a small one-time infusion into the county budget.

This election is both off year and off month, so I encourage you to vote Yes and vote early at the Auditor's Office in the Latah County Courthouse.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.