

Unexpected high costs put hospital merger in doubt

The transition of Uxbridge's hospital from Oshawa's Lakeridge Health Corporation to the Markham Stouffville Hospital Corporation has fallen off the tracks due to almost \$2 million in unexpected technology costs.

In an internal memo sent out to Lakeridge Health employees recently, Uxbridge's chief operating officer Garth Johns explained the board of Markham Stouffville Hospital (MSH) decided to withdraw from further transfer discussions because they did not want to pay the estimated costs. Lakeridge also does not plan to pay the costs.

The information technology costs were "particularly disconcerting" to the two hospital corporations, Johns outlined in the memo, though he did not go into details.

Dr. Jim MacLean, president of MSH, said a technology working group has pegged the technology costs at \$1.8 million, about three times more than MSH had expected the transition to cost.

MacLean said the technology costs include: the need to create a high speed communications link between Uxbridge's hospital and MSH; licencing fees associated with the transition; increased hardware costs; and labour costs for employees to work on the transfer.

If Uxbridge cannot become a full-scale branch of MSH, MacLean said he believes there is an opportunity to at least improve the communications

linkage between Uxbridge and Markham in order to improve the transfer of patient files.

But both Garth Johns and Lakeridge's CEO Brian Lemon said they have not given up on the transfer taking place.

Lemon said Lakeridge would be asking the Ministry of Health to cover the transition costs.

'I don't think for a moment Markham Stouffville is walking away (from the transfer).'

— Uxbridge Mayor Gerri Lynn O'Connor

Lemon pointed out that it was the province's Durham (and areas) District Health Council that recommended the transfer of Uxbridge take place.

He said the costs should therefore be borne by the province. The district health council made the decision last December following an extensive public consultation in November.

"Reasonable independent people have determined this (transfer) is in the long term interests of Uxbridge," Lemon said.

John Letherby, a spokesman from the Ministry of Health, said the ministry is unable to comment on whether it is prepared to pay the transition costs because it has not even been notified that the transfer has fall-

en through.

"We can't comment on something we don't know about," he explained.

At a recent Uxbridge council meeting, Mayor Gerri Lynn O'Connor received unanimous support from council to lobby the Ministry of Health to cover the transition costs.

She said she was unsure if Uxbridge would come to the table with money if the ministry rejects the funding request.

"I don't really think tax dollars at the local level should pay for something like this," she explained.

The Mayor said she was initially "stunned" upon learning the transfer talks had broke down. However, she believes the funding issue is a small hurdle that must be overcome in order to continue the transition.

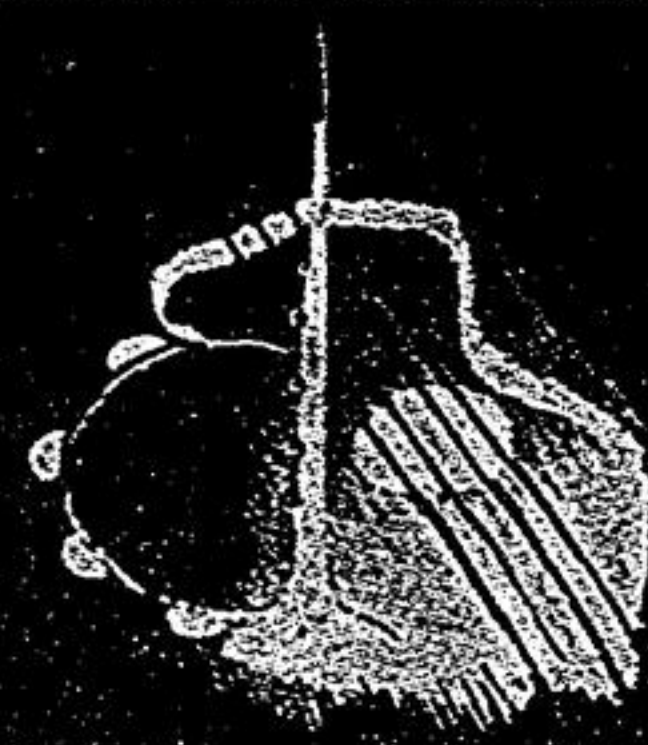
"I don't think for a moment Markham Stouffville is walking away (from the transfer)," the mayor told council. "Its concern is financial and I understand that."

However, MacLean said MSH would probably let Lakeridge lobby the government if it wants to continue the transition.

MacLean added: "I think given the economic realities that are facing the province of Ontario and all of us... one would have to ask the question, 'Should this transfer go ahead or should that money be used more wisely on other things?'"

— From the Uxbridge Times Journal

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