By Josh Sumner

The Wauneta Breeze

With news of the decision by Vetter Health Services to close Heritage of Wauneta Nursing Home still fresh on the minds of many, several local citizens have taken it upon themselves to search for ways to save the facility.

Two of those citizens are Terry Engell and Page Johnston, the latter of whom had the rare opportunity to speak as a community member to the board on which he serves. The pair of Wauneta citizens spoke to the board last Tuesday in an effort to update members about the process, and to seek its backing in the quest to keep the nursing home alive.

The board didn't blink an eye.

"This is a no-brainer," said board member Tony Cribelli, whose sentiment of support was echoed by all fellow board members in attendance. When asked if a special meeting could be scheduled to discuss the future of Heritage, should one be necessary, the board members again showed unfettered support.

Engell and Johnston presented well-prepared statements about the availability of grants, the potential roadblocks going forward and other general concerns relating to the future of the facility.

Engell said the current approach to saving the facility focuses on the sale of the building. According to Engell, the chances of getting grants to help pay for repairs to the building —

including the installation of a sprinkler system — increase if it's owned by a not-for-profit group.

Johnston, who praised Engell for her investigative work on the matter, said many uncertainties still exist regarding the potential acquisition of the building. Vetter's plans for the building, as well as the cost of installing a new sprinkler system, remained unclear at the time of the meeting.

"What we've done is try to investigate it to formulate a plan," said Johnston.

An entity, whether in the form of a not-for-profit group or the Village of Wauneta itself, must acquire the facility to keep its services alive. According to Johnston, several area nursing homes are owned by the towns they serve, including Imperial and Trenton.

Although no financial commitment or action was taken by the Village Board, its members were unified in giving Engell and Johnston the blessing to continue to search for ways to save Heritage.

Johnston outlined a strategy that begins by contacting Vetter Health Services in an attempt to understand their plans. Researching options and resources would be next, followed by a report back to the Village Board, said Johnston.

Johnston added that he has looked into the subject enough to know that once the physical property was acquired, the purchase of licensed beds would also be necessary. He said he has already begun researching the financing options for purchasing those beds.

The Chase County Hospital Foundation has indicated a willingness to help in the search for grants, too, said Johnston.

Other action

In further business the board:

• Requested that Terry Harris gets an appraisal for the building he is wishing to buy, the Veils Unlimited Building, owned by Bob and Willa McBride. The Village Board said it would like to see an appraisal before making a decision on whether to give Harris a $20,000 Community Development Block Grant loan.

• Approved the Wauneta Chamber of Commerce's request for a special designated liquor license for this year's Harvest Fest dance.

• Authorized spending $491.90 for a new propane line at the Wauneta Fire Hall.

• Approved the invoice from SWNCBC, and related draw-down form, for project costs for the OOR program/grant.

• Met in closed session to discussion possible litigation. No action was taken.