

Village Board of Wauneta retains attorney at special meeting

Written by Wauneta Breeze
Friday, 05 August 2011 21:32 -

Lawyer Richard Nelson to assist Village in quest to save Heritage of Wauneta

By Josh Sumner

The Wauneta Breeze

The Wauneta Village Board voted to retain counsel for legal services with Richard Nelson, of the Law Offices of Erickson and Sederstrom, in Lincoln, at a special meeting held last Tuesday.

The move is just another step in the community-wide mission to save the town's nursing home, Heritage of Wauneta.

Nelson has a strong background in healthcare, having served as a member of the Nebraska Health and Human Services System Policy Cabinet from 1999 to 2006, among his many credentials. Wauneta Village Board member Page Johnston said he believes Nelson will be an asset as the town tries to figure out how to keep Heritage of Wauneta alive.

"We had reached a point where we needed somebody with more expertise," said Johnston.

Because healthcare is such a specialized business, having someone who is familiar with its intricacies is a necessity. Johnston and fellow community member Terry Engell have been busy researching ways to keep the nursing home alive since the announcement of its planned closure by Vetter Health Services on July 6.

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But both Johnston and Engell admitted they had reached the point where an expert's guidance was needed. The two main issues going forward, which Nelson will help resolve, are the acquisition of the building and the replacing of its licensed beds.

"We can't do much without a facility," said Engell. Understanding Vetter's intentions for the facility and its beds will be Nelson's first order of business, according to Johnston.

There are currently 16,814 licensed beds spread across 223 healthcare facilities in the state of Nebraska, according to Engell. Engell has been persistent in searching for replacements for the 38 licensed beds currently at Heritage, which will presumably be lost when Vetter Health Services is no longer in control of the facility.

Because Nebraska is currently in a moratorium, which keeps licensed beds from being added in nursing homes across the state, new licensed beds will most likely need to be purchased at Heritage of Wauneta. Vetter's plans for the 38 beds at Heritage have not been made clear, but the consensus is that they will most likely be moved to another facility.

The cloud of uncertainty regarding many of the business decisions Vettters will make at Heritage of Wauneta necessitates the need to open up dialogue, said Engell and Johnston.

"We need to enter into formal discussion with Vettters," said Johnston. "That's the principle reason for retaining Mr. Nelson's services. We have made preliminary contacts...but it had been nothing of a formal nature. We needed someone with professional expertise to represent us in this pursuit."

It should be made clear that Nelson's services were in no way sought for litigious purposes — he's being retained as council to investigate and pursue a viable alternative to closing the Wauneta nursing home.

Johnston said the fact that Nelson is an attorney is a plus, because there are certain legal issues that enter into the healthcare equation. Johnston made it clear what Nelson and the Village of Wauneta were not going to do.

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“We’re not going to sue anybody,” said Johnston.

Nelson met with village board members during a special meeting yesterday (Wednesday). The purpose of the meeting was to get acquainted with the community and the current situation facing its nursing home, as well as to develop a plan for bargaining going forward.

Other action

In further business, the board:

- Reviewed and discussed the preliminary budget figures for the 2011-12 fiscal year. Final budget documents will be prepared by the auditors and a budget hearing will be held at a later date.
- Entered executive session for the purpose of discussing a real estate acquisition. No action was taken.