

MINUTES OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CITY COUNCIL
OF THE CITY OF FOSSTON, POLK COUNTY MINNESOTA
September 19, 2023

Pursuant to due call and notice thereof, a special meeting of the Council of the City of Fosston, Polk County Minnesota was held at New Journey Church, 505 9th St NW, on Tuesday, September 19, 2023, at 5:00 p.m.

A promotional video from our marketing group for the “Find Your Place in Fosston” campaign was played prior to the start of the meeting.

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Offerdahl with the following members present: Anderson, Dufault, LePier and Mulry. Absent: None. Others in attendance were: Cassie Heide, Sarah Manecke, Stephen Larson, Dyana Dunnigan, Bob Overmoe, Patricia Wangler, Evan Fonder, Mark Finstad, Dr. David Herman, Dr. Richard Vetter, Dr. Mark Thompson, Dr. Stefanie Gefroh, Dr. Michelle Thieman, Callen Weispfenning, Tanner Goodrich, Frank Modich, Louis St. George and many community members and stakeholders.

Recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mayor Offerdahl stated the purpose of the City of Fosston Rural Healthcare/OB meeting with Essentia was to inform the public of the dispute resolution process the city has entered with Essentia to restore OB labor & delivery services in Fosston and to hear from the Essentia Executive Team and the OB Task Force. Offerdahl introduced the council, Essentia Executive Team, and OB Task Force Members.

Motion was made by Andeson, seconded by Mulry to approve the agenda. Motion carried by unanimous vote.

Dr. Vetter presented on behalf of Essentia. He practiced in Fargo as a FMOB for 25 years and spent the last 5 years as the Chief Medical Officer. Dr. Vetter says Essentia is committed to the Fosston community with safe & high-quality care. He noted that they have spent approximately \$13,000,000 in 14 years on the facility and plan to add more preventive medicine, specialty care, technology and expand the ER. Dr. Vetter indicated that maternity care is changing. There is an increased number of higher risk patients with complications such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity, smoking, illicit drug use, age, etc. and in general, patients are much sicker than they were 20-30 years ago. To safely provide OB labor & delivery services, Essentia notes that we need to have four (4) doctors, two of which do cesarians and each doctor should deliver 40-50 babies per year to maintain competency. Initially they put a pause on OB labor & delivery citing a need for nurses. Dr. Vetter indicated that recruiting physicians who want to deliver babies in rural communities has been challenging. It has also been challenging to find nursing staff as most nurses are not working full-time anymore. The increasingly more common model in rural communities is the shared maternity care model where a local family physician provides the prenatal & postnatal care and another doctor at a larger facility delivers the baby.

City Administrator, Cassie Heide, presented on behalf of the OB Task Force. In 2009 the City of Fosston, First Care Medical Services and Essentia Community Hospitals and Clinics (ECHC) entered into an affiliation agreement. Part of the agreement ensured that Core Services, such as OB, would continue to be provided in Fosston. In May of 2022, local Essentia Administration informed the city that OB services were going on divert for 120 days. The city has not received written notice 474 days after Essentia has not delivered a baby in Fosston. Heide indicated that an OB Task Force was formed, which included 15 dedicated stakeholders within our community. The task force met more than a dozen times with local and Essentia “West” executives and there were scores of phone calls, texts, emails, and one-on-ones. The task force has had a clear goal throughout the process. Local Essentia staff, EDA members, city & school staff, and task force members spread the good word on Essentia leadership being committed to restoring OB in Fosston during a basketball double header. Heide received a letter from the Essentia West Market Executive team in mid-May indicating they were fully committed to resuming OB services no than December 31, 2023. After being given 3 different start dates and not meeting those dates, the city and task force feeling changed and became skeptical of Essentia executives’ true intentions of restarting OB in Fosston. The goal post has moved from 75 babies/year and more nursing staff to 200 babies/year and four (4) doctors needed. Regarding the safety and health of mothers, 90% of births today are level 1 basic care births, meaning they can be safely delivered in a hospital like Fosston. High risk patients are already being transferred to other facilities where specialty maternal care is available.

Evan Fonder also presented on behalf of the OB Task Force. He reached out to other hospitals like Essentia Health Moose Lake, Ortonville Area Health Services, LifeCare Medical in Roseau, and Riverview Health in Crookston to see what their OB practices were. Fonder pointed out that Essentia Health Moose Lake in the East market delivers 80-100 babies with 2 Essentia providers and an independent clinic. The enrollment and population in Moose Lake are similar to Fosston. Essentia East seems very supportive of the FMOB delivery structure whereas the West market is not. Ortonville delivers 80-100 babies with 5 providers. Their administrator says Fosston absolutely needs to have OB Labor & Delivery services. According to Katy Kozhimannil, Director of Rural Health Research Center, many rural hospitals around the country are delivering less than 200 per year as it’s a core service for a community regardless of financial viability. When a labor and delivery department close, there tend to be more emergency deliveries and more preterm births, which are the leading cause of infant mortality and growth and developmental delays. Fonder pointed out that mothers are being told in Fosston that they need to go to Detroit Lakes for their pre-natal and post-natal care in addition to labor & delivery. Mothers will stay where they delivered and well child checks will happen where children were delivered. Mothers are a driving force as to where the family goes for appointments. Thus, there is a threat of additional services being discontinued and a loss of confidence in the clinic and hospital.

Pat Wangler, former First Care & Essentia Hospital Administrator, addressed the council. She is very passionate about rural healthcare and indicated that OB is a core service that must be provided, which is why it was written into the 2009 affiliation agreement. While in Fosston, she noted that our hospital already screened mothers and did an excellent job of it. There were very few emergencies during her time and none that resulted in death. She believes that greed & money are the reason for this “pause” in OB services. Labor & delivery services are generally

not a moneymaker for hospitals due to many births covered by Medicaid. Wangler was adamant that Essentia put in the work to upgrade our facility in Fosston and hire the necessary staff to accommodate all OB services. She exclaimed, "This is a devastating course of action, and it must be stopped". Mayor Offerdahl asked Wangler if the intention of OB was to include labor & delivery. Wangler indicated that OB services are to include labor, delivery and neonatal care as part of the affiliation agreement. Staff negotiated to ensure that OB was included as a core service that must be provided. Bob Overmoe confirmed this statement as well.

Heide indicated that the council has passed three resolutions as part of this dispute process. Mediation will be the next step in the process and if that is unsuccessful, then we will move to arbitration. Heide indicated that the city would keep the community informed throughout the process.

In response to Heide, Dr. Vetter said that Essentia really needs to take into consideration the resources available in Fosston to ensure the safety of mom and baby. He ensured that this was not a financial decision. Essentia supports its rural communities. He agrees that care should be provided closest to home, but it needs to be safe and sustainable.

Members of the public were given the opportunity to address council. Judy Ophus, retired Polk County Public Health nurse, pointed out that she had three teenage mothers receiving OB care in Fosston when the "pause" began. Due to limited access to medical transportation, two of them transferred to different providers and it was very difficult for the other mother to travel to Detroit Lakes for all of her appointments. Andrea Wilson said she had her son in Fosston during the peak of covid and she received wonderful care here. With her daughter, she was forced to travel to Detroit Lakes for appointments & delivery. She was not considered high risk, but her baby had been breached for months and staff in DL had failed to catch this. If it wasn't for a planned c-section, the outcome could have been much worse. Kim Rue pointed out that women have been delivering babies for years. She asked, "What's next if labor & delivery doesn't come back?" Joan Dufault expressed concern with the shared care model. She went to Essentia Detroit Lakes recently for a 2nd opinion. She was told by the provider there that they would be her primary care provider going forward and she could come there for all services. Dufault indicated that she likes and respects Dr. Cheryl White in Fosston and will continue her primary care through her. She questioned how the shared care model will work when local hospitals within the same network aren't communicating with each other as to what services will be done here or there. Sue Christen was a surgical technician for 8 years in Fosston. She noted that Dr. Lucy Peterson was available to do emergency surgeries in Fosston, including babies, but was cut by Essentia Health because she wasn't an employee. She was very competent and wanted to be here. Nicole Johnson was an OB nurse at Riverview Health in Crookston for 10 years. She noted that nurses generally work when it's convenient for their family. Just because they don't work full time, doesn't mean they aren't competent or skilled to do their job. She's now a college instructor and indicated that half her class wants to be an OB nurse. She believes that Fosston can do this. Evan Fonder noted that with the pause, they have seen an up-tick of midwives doing home births. They need immediate access to emergency care. Karen Norland was a paramedic for 35 years and they did a lot of OB transfers. She said that Fosston has always had great doctors. Kate Moore is an expecting mother who doctors in Fosston and is concerned & frustrated about having to deliver her baby in Detroit Lakes with an unfamiliar doctor. Lynae Finseth indicated that she loved

being a nurse for Essentia when she retired a couple years ago. What the executives don't understand is that people here live and breathe Fosston.

Mayor Offerdahl asked Attorney Stephen Larson to explain what the next step in the process is. The City of Fosston has taken the position that Essentia is in breach of the affiliation agreement because labor & delivery is not being provided as part of OB, which is a core service. The OB Task Force has been involved in all the negotiations because they feel labor & delivery can be done in Fosston. Larson indicated that we are here because there is a contract. The city has three options – withdraw the notice of dispute, extend an informal process with Essentia to try reach a resolution or proceed with mediation. If no agreement can be reached through mediation, then we go to arbitration. The arbitration panel can allow Essentia to discontinue OB services. The city can then terminate the affiliation agreement and transfer membership back to First Care.

Council considered proceeding with mediation. The resolution will allow the city to resolve all issues at once, including an investigation into whether other services may be in breach of contract as well.

Motion was made by Anderson, seconded by LePier to proceed with mediation and pass the resolution. Members in favor: Anderson, Dufault, LePier and Offerdahl. Mulry abstained. Motion carried.

There being no further business to come before the council, motion was made by Anderson, seconded by Dufault to adjourn. Motion carried by unanimous vote.

Cassandra Heide, City Administrator