

Kosciusko Attala County Healthcare at a Crossroads
By Steve Zea KADC President
A first in a series on economic development

Like all facets of the economy, healthcare in Kosciusko-Attala County is either moving forward or will begin to decline. There are two major ingredients to health care besides the all important patients and that is medical staff and facilities. In Attala County we are blessed with an outstanding medical staff including 12 doctors assisted by an outstanding and highly trained medical staff. In the larger economic picture medical related jobs of all types exceed over 800 individuals in our community.

This makes healthcare one of the three largest industries in Attala County with education and manufacturing being the others. Healthcare is economic development since it easily meets the accepted national definition of creating wealth. It becomes apparent that maintaining physicians and attracting more physicians is very important to Kosciusko and Attala County.

A recent report by the Oklahoma Physicians Manpower Training Commission demonstrated that one physician coming to a community brings an average of 50 new jobs and creates an average of over \$1.1 million in new revenue for the community annually. The Kentucky Center for Rural Health estimates a rural physician generates \$2 million a year in new economic impact. From these reports one can see healthcare is big business and it is certainly a vital part of our economy in Kosciusko and Attala County.

To keep doctors in the community and recruit new ones requires modern facilities and new ancillary services. Here lies our problem since one of our current clinics is over crowded and our hospital will need to be replaced or remodeled. The present Kosciusko Medical Clinic was constructed to accommodate 4 doctors. It has been expanded to maximum size for the available acreage and now has 10 practicing physicians. The building is over 22 years old and lacks space to add needed services. It also lacks adequate parking forcing patients to park on adjoining property and the clinic to rent parking space from the hospital. Our hospital is also dated and was built in 1959. Montfort Jones Memorial Hospital was built under the Hill-Burton Medical Act of 1943. The age and configuration of the space will warrant a major renovation or a new hospital in the near future.

The physician needs are immediate and will be addressed through a long term lease for a new facility hopefully near the hospital for convenience and quick accessibly to patients in the hospital. The community needs to be supportive as the physicians will pay for this new facility that will permit the medical staff of this community to continue to grow and provide the modern diagnostic services and patient care we desire and require.

The concern in regards to the hospital is real but more complex. To determine what the future long term care needs are for the community, plus reach a determined path to achieve the facility needs is difficult. This is further complicated by future need versus what can be afforded. Thus to reach these conclusions a comprehensive study that

examines all the aspects of healthcare for our citizens and how these can be met locally must be commissioned. Funding for a remodeled or new facility will be a very complex difficult decision and will likely include local, state and federal funds both loans and grants.

This study will address not only the current conditions but also what needs are desired by our community such as reestablishing the delivery of babies in Kosciusko. This one service would reduce the current leakage of healthcare dollars to Starkville and Jackson. Our hospital desires to return deliveries to our community so this must be a major factor in any study.

The community must support our hospital board and staff as they begin the process of determining future needs. A long- term solution requires a commitment from all the community and the understanding that what is started today will require at least a three to four year timeline. Besides the completion of the study there must be a review of the findings, time to seek funding sources, obtain funding commitments, and design a renovated or new facility and then construction. The construction process will take at least two years whatever alternatives are selected.

There is very strong support from the business community to begin this process. The KADC Planning Session recognized the need for a comprehensive review of our healthcare needs this past January. Healthcare and education are the two most important quality of life issues as they relate to attracting business, industry and individuals to our community. The Kosciusko Medical Group and the KADC have pledged funding towards the required study. This important first step should begin as soon as possible. To delay will only lengthen an already long rigorous process. The economic impact to our community is too great to jeopardize our economic future by not having adequate healthcare facilities to meet the current and future needs of our citizens.

We need to position Kosciusko and Attala County to be a healthcare destination for our region. This will allow our community to achieve the full economic impact of our healthcare industry by first keeping our healthcare dollars in our community and then attracting more patients to the community. It will also allow us to separate ourselves from other small towns by having superior medical care. Our entire community must support this major undertaking and offer the support to our physicians and our hospital as they plan and implement the future healthcare needs for Kosciusko and Attala County. The future begins now so please express your support to our local physicians and to the hospital board and staff.