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Right decision pledging funds for health care

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When it came time to own up to municipal responsibilities as they apply to health care, the past couple weeks, both Belleville and Hastings County councils acquitted themselves well and did the right thing.

Both committed to helping fund capital fundraising initiatives for hospitals in Kingston, even when some on their own councils questioned the propriety of helping hospitals seemingly far out of our area.

Representatives from the University Hospitals Kingston Foundation appeared before both councils in the past couple of weeks, requesting financial support for a \$370 million target to provide new equipment and services for three Kingston hospitals. The project involves major upgrades to two hospitals (Kingston General and Hotel Dieu) while bringing together two other health care facilities (St. Mary's of the Lake and Mental Health Services and the Providence Continuing Care Centre) in a new hospital.

Belleville council has agreed to contribute \$820,000 to help the three hospitals in the Limestone City and that is only fair given the number of people from the Quinte region who access advanced tertiary care at Kingston's health facilities.

But, Belleville won't be writing any cheques to the Kingston hospitals foundation until it meets its commitment to hospitals in Quinte - a six-year promise to Quinte Health Care's foundation at \$350,000 a year for the Imagine campaign.

Fronted by chairman Lyle Vanclief, the local foundation's \$10 million Imagine Campaign that started in April, 2006, recently concluded exceeding its target and raising \$11 million. The campaign's goals was to purchase new diagnostic medical equipment for Quinte Health Care hospitals.

The Imagine campaign brought a new CT scanner to Trenton Memorial, replaced the CT scanner at Belleville General and funded an MRI unit that will be operational at Belleville General in early 2008.

When one considers that the province has placed the onus on purchasing new, expensive capital equipment squarely on the shoulders of the hospitals themselves, it is no longer a discretionary decision as to whether communities contribute to their hospital foundations, it is a necessity.

Both Belleville and Hastings County councils moved quickly to answer the call and that's as it should be. Quinte West will be asked to do the same at its meeting today and we urge councillors there, too, to make the pledge.

Hastings County council didn't hesitate to approve a contribution, and approval at its budget deliberations is seen as a formality. Jim Pine, chief administrative officer for Hastings County, said the special resolution supported by council at its most recent meeting secures the commitment for providing \$654,000 in 10 equal installments beginning next year. The motion will still be forwarded to budget discussions in the new year but, Pine said, is not likely to be altered.

The need is clearly there, not only for Kingston residents but for those from Quinte - some 13,000 from Belleville, alone, statistics show - who use Kingston's specialized care facilities.

At Kingston General Hospital, for example, the following facilities are planned and will be equipped with funds raised in the foundation drive: Expanded cancer centre, new home for the pediatric inpatient unit, more ICU and medical/surgical beds, expanded dialysis program, a new mental health inpatient unit and improved surgical support services.

There are also new facilities and equipment planned for Hotel Dieu and St. Mary's on the Lake hospitals - in the latter case, a complete new hospital.

In a time when it appears the province is either unwilling or unable to fund its commitment to health care, it increasingly falls on the consumers of health care - the taxpayer - to help fund improvements. It's become a fact of life and one of the prices we pay for universal health care. So it shouldn't come as any surprise when foundations come calling for help to pay the way.

For a few dollars per resident, it's reasonable insurance for the time when we need the services of an advanced medical facility, be it in Belleville or Kingston.

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