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Health care instincts

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A few years ago, the Township of Rideau Lakes was asked - and agreed - to make a donation to a small community hospital in its vicinity. The town council then did something completely unexpected. Without being asked, it contacted Kingston's largest hospital foundation and offered to make a significant donation - \$82,500 over 10 years - with no strings attached.

Rideau Lakes councillors, it seems, instinctively understood that it was in their interest - and the interest of their 9,300 residents - to support Kingston hospitals. Unfortunately, it's an instinct that isn't shared by all elected officials.

It's been two years since Rideau Lakes councillors made the first payment on their landmark pledge and, to be fair, a number of other communities have recently made similar commitments. In part, this is because they have been formally asked to make a contribution. After a year of watching their residents be turned away from Kingston's overflowing hospitals, often to health centres hundreds of kilometres from family members or across the Canada-U.S. border, they didn't need much convincing.

And yet many municipalities do.

The city of Belleville recently pledged \$820,000 to Kingston hospitals, and the County of Hastings committed another \$654,000. Belleville and Hastings County also have generous physician recruitment plans that have successfully attract family doctors. So when it comes to health care, these two civic governments clearly "get it."

The Belleville and Hastings commitments were thoughtful responses to a campaign by the University Hospitals Kingston Foundation, a relatively new organization that raises money for the city's three hospitals. The foundation is in the "quiet phase" of a \$50-million capital campaign to support long-overdue redevelopment projects at Kingston General Hospital, Hotel Dieu Hospital and the old psychiatric hospital now run by Providence Care.

The so-called quiet phase started last winter when foundation representatives started making presentations at municipal councils and county councils in southeastern Ontario to ask for donations based on the number of patients from their area who are treated at Kingston hospitals. Gananoque, for example, has been asked to give \$300,000, Quinte West \$717,000, Frontenac County \$2 million, Lennox and Addington County \$1.895 million, and so on.

Kingston has been asked to give the largest amount of \$16 million, of which \$6 million would come from rebates on development and impost fees. Over the next few weeks, the foundation will be asking councils in Picton, Brockville, Smiths Falls, Lanark and Perth for contributions as well.

Senior officials at Kingston General were criticized recently for launching a campaign to make the public and elected officials more aware of the hospital's importance in the region, not just Kingston. The spontaneous support of Belleville and Hastings should take some of the sting out of that criticism.

But many councils have deferred a decision on the foundation's request until the 2008-09 budget discussions. Some see health care as a purely provincial responsibility, despite the fact that capital campaigns are an essential, non-negotiable aspect of all of hospital redevelopment projects. Others are also torn between the hospital's needs and the needs of the greater community.

It's not always easy making decisions about spending taxpayer dollars, but councillors might find it less painful if they simply listened to their instincts. Rideau Lakes councillors did. So did Belleville and Hastings. And then they did the right thing.

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