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That was the theme of the four-and-a-half hour public hearing held April 5 at the Sharon Town Hall.

There, representatives from Connecticut's Office of Health Care Access (OHCA) came to hear from area residents and interested parties about their opinions on the sale of Sharon Hospital to Health Quest (see the article by Cynthia Hochswender on Page A1.)

It was clear from the testimony of those whose mission it is to run the hospital that its current ownership, RCCH, could not continue to support it, and the consensus among the health care professionals was that having Health Quest take over this area's 78-bed community hospital and convert it back to a nonprofit entity would be the best outcome that could be hoped for.

Those who spoke in favor of the sale made many of the same points about the hospital: that the medical care it provides to patients from surrounding communities, 60 percent of them from New York state, is critically important and could not be duplicated by any of the more far-flung facilities in the Tri-state region; that the jobs and population it draws to the area are key to the health of the local economy; that the hospital will benefit from an influx of resources from Health Quest, including not just money but also a larger pool of primary care physicians and specialists.

Those who spoke of concerns about the sale wanted to be sure that the smaller area health care support groups retain the same level of funding as they had before the sale; that the board of the Foundation for Community Health (FCH) be sure they are spending their nonprofit funds carefully, in the way their original donors (including those who gave money to Sharon Hospital before it converted to for-profit in 2002) would have preferred; and that the FCH negotiated the best deal it could for the benefit of the hospital.

If the proposal could not withstand the scrutiny of both OHCA and those who challenged it, then it should be amended. As it is, concerns were answered well, and the plans presented to move forward would not only retain, but improve, services at Sharon Hospital. Health Quest representatives said changes in programs would be based on careful research on the actual needs of the community.

It should not be forgotten that at the heart of it, this is a very personal issue. Those who testified in support of the sale of the hospital spoke of their own connections to it. They were born there, their parents were born there, their children were born there. Then, they needed to bring those children over to the hospital's emergency room to patch them up after some injuries that seem to come as rites of passage during childhood. Those are the ties that give clarity to the need for having a medical facility nearby.

After years of struggle to find the right formula for this area's center of medical care in times when hospital reimbursements have gone down and taxes increased, the Health Quest purchase of Sharon Hospital could be the step that finally gives it a chance to not only survive, but to thrive, thereby giving the region it serves a wider range of better health care.

This area needs to have a hospital, and this could well be the only way left to achieve that. OHCA should approve the sale.

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