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1 / 1 Wellmont Health System Board of Directors Chairman Roger Leonard says a recommendation for a partner for the health care provider could be made in the next two months. (Nathan Baker/Johnson City Press)



## Wellmont leaders look to leave limelight to mull merger options

NATHAN BAKER (</AUTHORS?USER=NATHAN%20BAKER>) • OCT 17, 2014 AT 9:23 PM

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BRISTOL — As Wellmont Health System’s merger search inches toward its conclusion, leaders plan to retreat into the board room to deliberate over the remaining candidates.

Now concluding the community feedback phase of the hospital system’s search for a merger partner and entering an audit and verification stage, members of Wellmont Health System’s leadership held a press conference Friday at Bristol Regional Medical Center to discuss the progress.

A year after initiating the search, board of directors Chairman Roger Leonard said not much will be revealed publicly by the company or the board for the next six or seven weeks, as search committee members conduct final interviews with representatives of the three systems still considered candidates for the merger and verify the information they’ve submitted.

“We’ve got three very different and compelling options, each of them bringing different skills and resources to the table,” Leonard said. <http://www.johnsoncitypress.com/frontpage/2014/10/17/Wellmont-leaders-look-to-leave-limelight-to-mull-merger-options.html> Dispersing rumors the board has already made its decision and is merely going through the motions to appear to be performing its due diligence is limited and there is no consensus among the board members and the appointed search committee.

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“That’s clearly not the case,” he said. “There are still a lot of questions we want to be answered before we make a final recommendation.”

Since August, a group of local businessmen, politicians and other community leaders have been pressuring Wellmont to merge its six hospitals in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia with regional competitor Mountain States Health Alliance.

The new system, worth \$1.8 billion and employing nearly 15,000, could end more than a decade of unhealthy competition, they say, could keep governance of the hospitals and patients under local control and a partnership with East Tennessee State University could make the college a research powerhouse.

In July, Wellmont announced its search had been whittled down to three candidates, one of which was a regional system, but board members and executives at the company repeatedly cited non-disclosure contracts when asked if the local system was Johnson City’s Mountain States.

Board Vice Chairwoman Julie Bennett said a local merger could have, “some compelling potential benefits, but there are some concerns that would have to be overcome, as well.”

Noting that the Tri-Cities has two hospitals with Level 1 trauma centers, the same number contained in the entire state of South Carolina, Leonard said the competition between Wellmont and Mountain States over the years has produced top-level care in the region, denying the premise that the competition has been unhealthy.

To position the system’s care centers to weather the drastic structural changes to health care fees and services in this country, Leonard didn’t say remaining a separate entity was not an option, but was “the least attractive option.”

“Things change, the economy changes,” he said. “Health care is changing, and I don’t believe any of us see the possibility of the status quo being maintained.”

Producing a system with at least \$3 billion in annual revenue, which a Wellmont-Mountain States merger would not, would better secure its future, but Leonard also did not rule out dipping below that mark.

“The closer we can get to between \$3 and \$5 billion, the safer we are, but I would not call it a line in the sand,” he said.

The board still expects to make its recommendation for a merger near the end of the year.

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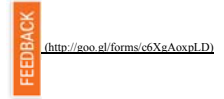
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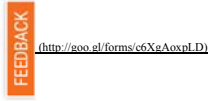
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