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Hospital board fires CEO as money woes highlighted

By **JESSIE STENSLAND**
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Following stark reports of financial distress and mismanagement at WhidbeyHealth, the elected board of hospital commissioners fired CEO Ron Telles without cause during a meeting Thursday afternoon.

Board President Ron Wallin said the board would immediately begin looking for an interim CEO; Telles agreed to continue working until some-

one is found. Under his contract, Telles will receive nine months of his \$430,000-a-year salary.

More staff cuts may be necessary, hospital leaders said earlier in the week, while the board may also look at other options in the future, including possible affiliations or even a buyout from another hospital system. The financial problems are so dire, officials said, that the hospital was recently turned down for a line

of credit.

In addition, commissioners learned they have been making decisions based upon inaccurate financial information.

Telles spoke briefly prior to going into executive session with the board to learn his fate.

"I just ask that the board make a decision to start the healing process to continue our mission of being a community-owned source of compassion, high-quality integrat-

ed health care system," he said. "That's all I ask."

Telles' termination didn't quell the anger of the few people who were allowed to comment at the end of the meeting. They complained about poor leadership, low wages of staff, ignored pleas for change and bullying from executives. One woman said the hospital has been "slowly driven to the grave" during years of mismanagement.

Bill McDaniel, a retired ad-

miral and a member of the hospital's foundation board, said the hospital commissioners took the right action. He suggested that former Chief Nursing Officer Erin Wooley, who was fired by Telles, could be the interim CEO.

Telles' termination came at the end of a dramatic few weeks at the publicly owned hospital district. It began with the medical staff overwhelm-

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Council applicants winnowed to four

By **JESSIE STENSLAND**
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Four candidates for appointment to an empty seat on the Oak Harbor City Council will move forward and be interviewed.

At their meeting Tuesday, members of the council took a straw poll to winnow the field of nine people who applied for the seat, which was vacated by Jeffrey Mack at the end of December.

They chose Ronnie Wright, Eric Marshall, John Chaszar and Fe Mischo to move forward to interviews planned for a Feb. 23 workshop meeting.

Each of the six council members chose their top four candidates. Wright and Marshall both received six votes, Chaszar received five votes and Mischo got three.

Wright is a managing partner at Pacific Grace Tax and Accounting and a board member of the Oak Harbor Chamber of Commerce, Whidbey Golf and Country Club and the Oak Harbor Creative Arts Commission.

Marshall is the publisher of the Whidbey Weekly and a member of the planning commission.

Chaszar is a substitute para-educator for the school district and the former manager of several casinos

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Photos by Karina Andrew/Whidbey News-Times

Count Dracula, played by Zoe Eisenbrey, emerges from his coffin to confront Jonathan Harker, played by Spencer Grubbs.

Drama club brings Dracula to life

By **KARINA ANDREW**
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Oak Harbor High School drama club members are sinking their teeth into a classic gothic play this weekend.

"Dracula" opened Feb. 17 at Oak Harbor High School. The show will run Feb. 17-19 and 24-26, with all performances beginning at 7 p.m.

Director Micki Gibson said she knew "Dracula" was the right choice for this year's main play when she saw how excited the club members became when she suggested it. Except for a small production of "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare" in September, "Dracula" is the first in-person show the drama club has put on since the beginning of the pandemic and, as such, presented unique challenges and opportunities for the cast and crew.

"They've worked really hard, so we're really proud of it," Gibson said. "But it's definitely been a challenge for us."

For one thing, audience members will be seated out in the auditorium to allow them to spread out instead of sitting on-stage black box style to watch the show up close as usual. While utilizing a larger space made sound engineering trickier, it also gave the club a chance to utilize more dramatic set pieces, including a large coffin for Count Dracula to emerge from.

The ensemble could also participate in a way that wouldn't have been possible in a smaller space, Gibson said.

Regular COVID mitigation measures such as testing and masking also came



Alora Van Auken, left, and A.J. Gibson rehearse in their roles of Lucy Westenra and Dr. Abraham Van Helsing for Oak Harbor High School's upcoming production of Dracula.

into play.

"Ironically, the most difficult part of our dress rehearsals so far has been remembering to take our mask off before going in for a scene," said senior A.J. Gibson, who plays Dr. Abraham Van Helsing in the show.

COVID precautions weren't the only challenge for the students. Several cast members said their characters took them out of their comfort zones and helped

them grow as performers.

Senior Zoe Eisenbrey said while he was ecstatic to be cast in the titular role of Dracula, the count's severe creepiness was a difficult hurdle to overcome.

"I don't like making people uncomfortable," he said. "I love other human beings, and I want them to feel like their bodily autonomy and their personhood is

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— Branded Content —

How do you properly clean a mattress?

Everett mattress experts weigh in

If you don't have a mattress protector, your mattress should ideally be cleaned every six months. While it may be tempting to haul it outside and hose it off, you may want to think again before you get your mattress wet.



"If there is any hint of liquid on the mattress, then the warranty is voided by the manufacturer," says Josh Rigsby of E.S.C. Mattress Center. "A lot of people think that the companies look for the most minute stain so they can void the warranty."

The best way to clean a mattress is not to get a stain in the first place by using a liquid-proof mattress protector. It's much easier to keep a mattress clean than to go in and clean the mattress itself.

Protect your investment and sleep soundly!

That's why E.S.C. preaches the need of a mattress protector — to the point that they give you 12 months to try the bed if it's \$699 or over and purchased with a mattress protector, or 90 days if not purchased with a protector.

"The reason is; if the protector fails, a professional steam-cleaner team needs to be sent out to clean the bed; and if it fails warranty because of a stain not coming out, they will then replace the mattress," Rigsby says. "Protectors are far and away our number-one recommended accessory and we recommend them to every guest, no matter what."

If you want to avoid having to clean your mattress, mattress protectors are a great place to start, but you should also wash your sheets often, and avoid eating in the bed.

Sheets, blankets, and pillowcases also absorb some of the dirt and oils that we give off when we sleep at night, which is why it's critical to wash the sheets — and your mattress protector — regularly. One study found that unwashed pillowcases and sheets had up to 39 times more bacteria than pet-food bowls and several thousand times more bacteria than a toilet seat.

"When we do delivery, we can tell when a guest had a protector or not," Rigsby says. "Beds without protectors are gross."

No one likes cleaning their mattress, so if you take preemptive steps to protect it, you can sleep soundly knowing your mattress is fresh and clean.

Family-owned E.S.C. Mattress Center believes sleep is a pillar of good health and offers all of the top brands such as Tempur-PEDIC, Stearns & Foster, and Sealy Posturepedic. They have interest-free financing and no-credit-needed financing so you don't have to settle for something that isn't right for you.

E.S.C. Mattress Center is located at 10121 Evergreen Way, Ste. 30, Everett. They're rated 5 stars on Yelp and Google, "A+" rated with the Better Business Bureau, and are a three-time Herald Readers' Choice winner.

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HOSPITAL

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ingly voting no confidence in Telles, Chief Operating Officer Garth Miller and attorney Jake Kempton, citing concerns about constant turnover, technical problems, the work environment and other issues.

Then Telles fired Wooley and three newer members of the executive team, causing a wave of concern and questions from hospital staff and community members.

The board also went into executive session during two special meetings in the week prior to Thursday's regular board meeting.

Telles was the hospital chief financial officer before he was hired as the CEO in 2019. He continued in both roles until a new CFO, Jim Childers, was hired at the beginning of this year.

The board meeting Thursday began with Childers and a consultant, Kevin Smith with the accounting firm EideBaily, providing details on the hospital's serious financial and book-keeping woes.

The hospital lost about \$14 million in 2020 but came out ahead by about \$1.4 million in 2021, which was about a 1% margin. The 2021 budget, however, was buoyed by millions of dollars in federal pandemic assistance and accelerated Medicare funds that the hospital isn't going to receive this year, Childers said.

Cash on hand dropped to nine days on Feb. 3 and is currently at about 14 days; last year it dropped into negative territory at different points.

Childers said earlier that the hospital should have about 150 days to be financially healthy.

Childers explained that the hospital sought a \$6.8 million bridge loan or line of credit to make payroll and other costs until May, when the levy revenues come in. The hospital was turned down by Savi Bank because bank officials questioned the ability of the hospital to repay. The hospital is also going to approach Heritage Bank and another lending institution.

At an employee meeting earlier in the week, Telles admitted that the hospital might have to look into more extreme solutions, such as working with a management company, affiliating with a different medical system or even a buyout. Those decisions, he said, are the board's to make.

Smith, a partner at the accounting firm, described the problems he encountered while reviewing the hospital's audits for 2019 and 2020.

The state auditor issued two findings against the hospital district last year, finding that it was two years behind in submitting complete and accurate financial reports.

Smith said he started the work about a year ago and immediately had problems.

"The information we received initially was just not good information," he told the board. "I'll just be direct with you."

He repeatedly asked for accurate information from the hospital but was stymied until Childers arrived this year.

"We kept pushing that information back, saying this isn't correct, we can't audit this," he said.

Also, Smith said the cost reports, which were prepared in-house, were so inaccurate that he had to recreate them from the beginning.

"There were major, major errors in the cost reports," he said.

As a result, the board was making financial decisions based on inaccurate information.

"From a board standpoint, just to be frank with you, those would be the concerns I would have of not receiving accurate financial information on a monthly basis," he said. "We're making \$3.5 million in adjustments that you're making decisions on."

In this year's budget, a combination of cost cutting and revenue increases are planned.

The hospital will save about \$1 million in 2023 from cutting the four executive positions. The savings will only be about \$380,000 this year because of the cost of severance payments, Childers said during the employee forum earlier in the week.

Childers also explained that the hospital is in the midst of a productivity survey that will analyze full-time equivalents, or FTEs, by department and compare those to benchmarks.

"I think we will find ways to right-size the organization," he said, adding that it will be an incremental process.

The hospital is increasing charges, which will mainly affect managed care companies and not co-pays or deductibles, and working with a new purchasing company; the district already renegotiated its anesthesiologist contract and discontinued a marketing contract.

The board adopted the 2022 budget during the meeting.

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