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[00:00:34] **Speaker 1** It was just about one year ago that Sacred Heart and St Joseph's Hospitals in Eau Claire announced they would close along with a clinics in the region. About a month later, Governor Tony Evers signed legislation to provide $15 million for Western Wisconsin hospital funding. But that money has been tied up over political fights and landed in the courts after Evers sued for release of the money last budget.

[00:01:01] **Speaker 2** On this was not what the people in Clare, at least the ones that talked to us and that included health care folks. They wanted a broader use of that money. So no, I mean, we're well past the idea that somehow I'm going to undo that veto. We need to get that money out. Joint Finance Committee does not have the legal authority to to do what they did. And so we're looking forward to a resolution in court.

[00:01:33] **Speaker 1** So western Wisconsin has yet to see the $15 million to help shore up health care access. But in the intervening months, the region has stepped up without it. The Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce formed a recovery task force right after news of the hospital and clinic closures. David Miner is president and CEO of the Chamber. He joins us now with an update on how health care needs are being met. Nearly a year after the hospitals pulled out. And David, thanks very much for being here.

[00:02:02] **Speaker 3** Absolutely. Good morning to you.

[00:02:04] **Speaker 1** Well, what happened in the last year to help fill the void of these closures?

[00:02:10] **Speaker 3** Well, really, several things took place. You know, once we stepped up the task force, Mayo Clinic, Marshfield Clinic, Oakleaf Clinic, they really took on the brunt of trying to absorb as much as they can. And again, we knew going into that that there was no way they could absorb all of it. But once we had a handle on what they could do and the expansions of their work, then we tried looking at other entities, other businesses that could come to the area and start to fill in some of those other pieces. So it's been a slow process. It's still happening as we talk, but it's it's we're we certainly haven't recovered fully, but we're we're in a good shape overall, I would say. But still, a lot of work yet to be done.

[00:02:58] **Speaker 1** And there are even new hospitals being envisioned to be built.

[00:03:05] **Speaker 3** Correct. So again, Oakleaf Network, what they did is they formed a coalition, a co-op. They are currently looking at building a new hospital. They have found a location in the Lake Valley area between Eau Claire and Chippewa Falls. They've been doing a lot of due diligence. They're also currently looking at standing Saint Joe's Hospital up in Chippewa Falls, which would be a bridge from now to when the new hospital and their fundraising takes place. And then the spiral out of Wausau is looking at building a hospital up in the Triple Falls area. So, again, a lot going on. You know, a lot of it for us in the task force is is standing back and allowing them all the opportunity to do what they need to do. But for us, it's about, you know, when we look at going down in March for our Chippewa Valley rally, making sure that when we talk health care, we're very specific about what are we asking for and what those entities may need to help them continue that expansion and or to grow their capacity to be able to handle all of the issues that still need to be resolved.

[00:04:16] **Speaker 1** What are you asking for specifically?

[00:04:20] **Speaker 3** That's a magical question. I don't necessarily have an answer to it, but what we're looking at is what will those entities need? Are there pilot programs per se, that could be launched here? Also, one of the things that has has been launched in this area is a rural health care initiative, looking at what is rural health care going to look like in the future and can we help develop it here? So part of that may be going down looking for funds to help invest in that. We will have probably a better answer to that question in the next 30 days or so. But really working with all those partners to understand what do you need, how do we put that together as a region and make that one large request?

[00:05:02] **Speaker 1** Now, I know that there are still gaps in care in the region, notwithstanding all of these entities standing up in this way. You mentioned birthing centers. What's the situation there?

[00:05:13] **Speaker 3** Again, we in the beginning, Marshfield took on more mail, took on more things, but that gap hasn't completely filled. So we do know and we have heard stories that where where expectant mothers have had to either be taken up to Duluth, over to the Twin Cities, other areas. So that is, you know, outside of. Some of the cancer patients as well. Those are areas we know that need some immediate concerns to be addressed. So we're not having to ship them out of our area.

[00:05:43] **Speaker 1** We talked earlier in this program about medical debt and charity care. How sustainable in your mind, is the health care industry between that and reimbursements for that care?

[00:05:55] **Speaker 3** I think one of the things that has to happen is an honest discussion in Washington, D.C., in Madison about reimbursement rates for Medicare and Medicaid. It just it has to happen. They're not sustainable. You know, you can't tell a business to only charge 47% or 50% on the dollar. Expect it to last long term. We know that that was part of the reason why HHS had left. So that conversation has to take place. But we're also looking at someone in Wisconsin. We're looking at some other opportunities. Are there ways for us to free up more federal dollars that are already there but that could be brought back to our state? And again, that may be done on a pilot program.

[00:06:36] **Speaker 1** Okay. Just briefly, what has this past year been like for patients, providers and citizens there?

[00:06:45] **Speaker 3** I don't think people really, truly understand the impact of losing two hospitals and 7010 clinics. A lot of people have have had a lot of anxiety, a lot of sleepless nights. But also, I don't think everybody understands how well this community in this region pulled together to do everything we could to make it the best we could. It wasn't perfect and is not. But I cannot thank the people in this area enough for what everybody has done from all sides to get us to this point.

[00:07:17] **Speaker 1** All right. David Miner, thank you very much.

[00:07:20] **Speaker 3** Thank you. Have a good day.

[00:07:26] **Speaker 1** Thank you. Well, you know, it really actually sounds positive on the positive trajectory here.

[00:07:34] **Speaker 3** It is. You know, I think Sanford Health coming into this region now, you know, a very completed merger with where Marshfield is going to be very good. You know, two new hospitals, Again, it's just now navigating all of that and making sure they can all work together.

[00:07:50] **Speaker 1** Yeah, that is a lot of navigation. But again, we really appreciate your time on this.

[00:07:56] **Speaker 3** Thank you very much. Good to see you again, too.