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—Contributor.....Randolph T. Holhut and Jeff Potter
—Contributor email.....jeff@commonsnews.org
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Notes from editor (not for publication):

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Rallygoers press BMH and its board to save Birthing
2 Center

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 Governor and secretary of human services stand firm: the
4 hospital already got state money for sustainability, and the
5 decision was part of the process

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

7 About 100 people showed up in front of Brattleboro
8 Memorial Hospital (BMH) Tuesday morning in a continuation of
9 community actions in support of keeping its Birthing Center
10 open.

After about 45 minutes of speeches from supporters and health care workers, many went into the hospital to attend a meeting of the BMH Board of Directors.

In a news release on Monday, organizers called on Brattleboro Memorial Hospital Birthing Center Providers, patients and families, Brattleboro Federation of Nurses (BFN) members, Brattleboro Healthcare United (BHU) members, and community partners and local labor organizations to “call on the Board to reverse its decision and work with healthcare workers, state leaders, and the community to preserve local birthing care.”

Ellen Schwartz from the Vermont Workers Center, one of the organizers of Tuesday’s event, was collecting signatures from attendees. She said that the proposed closing of Birthing Center “is just a symptom of the bigger crisis in rural healthcare in the U.S.”

Across the country, she said, small hospitals are struggling to stay open, leaving huge service gaps.

Schwarz also said that Gov. Phil Scott’s proposal to allow insurers to sell high-deductible policies in Vermont would end up costing hospitals even more money when families can’t cover a \$10,000 deductible before their insurance would kick in.

Governor’s office stands firm: no more funds

The rally comes after Gov. Phil Scott addressed the closure at a press conference in Montpelier on Friday, where he said no further state assistance would be provided to BMH despite intense lobbying from community members and civic, business, and nonprofit leaders.

Scott told reporters he was “a little surprised” to hear the request “because we are giving them help — we’re giving them \$1 million.”

The governor said that when BMH’s budgetary distress came to the surface, his administration provided the funding,

44 “but they had to come back to us with a sustainability plan.” The
45 announcement of the Birth Center’s closing was part of that
46 planning process, he said.

47 “They chose to close their birthing center,” Scott said.

48 “So now after the fact now they're coming and saying that they
49 need our help when we're giving them help.”

50 Scott called on his secretary of human services, Jenney
51 Samuelson, to address the BMH funding in more detail.

52 She echoed Scott’s account of the funding but said that

53 “You know, Brattleboro Memorial Hospital was in the
54 driver's seat in developing that plan, and part of that plan was to
55 cut birthing services at their hospital,” Samuelson said, calling it
56 “a very difficult decision on their hospital's part, but the decision
57 wasn't solely financial.”

58 She said that “we’ve been working with Brattleboro for
59 months, but the announcement of the Birthing Center closure
60 plans happened so abruptly because of unanticipated departures
61 of staff.

62 Dr. Corina Tennant, the chief of obstetrics and
63 gynecology BMH and a partner at Four Seasons OB/GYN &
64 Midwifery, told *The Commons* that staffing for the Birth Center
65 and related hospital services has suffered the loss of two
66 midwives and attributed her colleagues’ departures to a
67 combination of factors.

68 She said her colleagues were making approximately
69 \$20,000 less per year than they would in other hospitals
70 regionally, and they weren’t exempt from the issues around
71 housing — its lack of availability and its cost — which have
72 dogged Vermonters in recent years.

73 But Tennant said that the uncertainty looming over the
74 program even before the announcement in June was the
75 precipitating factor.

76 Samuelson said the birth rate at BMH is also declining —
77 to fewer than 220 this year, she said — while costs are rising.

78 She also said that “much of what we've seen in the news
79 is criticism about access” and pushed back on concerns that
80 families would need to drive farther to access care for families
81 and their children.

82 Samuelson said the Department of Human Services
83 worked with the Department of Health and “a myriad of other
84 folks in that community” to analyze the drive times and said they
85 are “staying relatively stable.”

86 She said that she was planning to come to Brattleboro on
87 Friday, and “we’re going to speak with the hospital.”

88 Travel fears

89 The fears of traveling long distances to give birth are real
90 for people who live in the outer reaches of Windham County.

91 Sarah and Miriam Schuldenfrei, two sisters who live in
92 West Townshend, both have children who needed BMH Birthing
93 Center’s services since Grace Cottage Hospital in Townshend no
94 longer has a maternity ward.

95 Sarah’s daughter Faye was born at home, but Sarah said
96 she and her newborn needed to be rushed to BMH after
97 complications developed.

98 “They saved both of our lives,” said Sarah.

99 Miriam gave birth to her son, Henry, at BMH six weeks
100 ago.

101 “We definitely can’t afford to lose this place,” she said.

102 For Tiffany Russo, now of Wardsboro, she thought so
103 highly of BMH’s service that she had both of her children, Coco
104 and Charlie, in Brattleboro even though was living in the Boston
105 area at the time of their births.

106 “I was in labor by the time I got here,” said Russo of her
107 first birth experience at BMH.

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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