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Speakers weigh pros, cons of new health dept.

While some cite benefits of coordination, others question funding, structure.

By CHAD UMBLE, New Era Staff Writer

Physicians, health care workers and state and local officials met this morning to discuss whether Lancaster County needs a public health department.

The forum, held at the Eden Resort Inn, was another step in a United Way-led study on the benefits of a new county health department.

Some attendees this morning lauded the coordination a local health department could provide, while others raised questions about its funding, structure and whether it would be perceived as unwelcome "big government."

Hilda Shirk, who moderated the forum and is managing the study project for the United Way of Lancaster County, said the comments would be incorporated into the eventual proposal.

"We're in the middle of the process. The beginning was years ago and the end will be when the county decides we'll have a public health department," Shirk said.

By the fall, the steering committee leading the study hopes to submit a resolution to county commissioners that would create the department, Shirk said.

If commissioners don't approve the measure, it could be put on the ballot as a referendum.

The United Way's effort began following a Drexel University feasibility study that found that a public health department could work here.

Shirk said a county health department could return decision making to local government, access new funds, centralize information and coordinate responses to health crises.

Some current state responsibilities -- including restaurant inspections -- would also shift from the state Department of Environmental Protection to a county health department.

If the county had a state-approved health department, it would qualify for new state funding, which would comprise the bulk of its budget, Shirk said. It would also be eligible for more state and federal grants, she added.

A preliminary budget for a county health department shows expenses in the first year of \$1.4 million, rising to \$1.7 million in the third year.

In the first year, 10 percent -- or \$146,070 -- of the department's budget would come from the county government. That number would increase to \$340,980, -- 20 percent of the total budget -- in the third year, the preliminary budget shows.

The department would begin with 16.5 employees and jump to 21.5 in the third year, according to the preliminary budget.

The specter of more government could be a tough sell to county residents, said County Commissioner Pete Shaub, who attended the forum.

"I just know that people aren't willing to talk about funding or structure or bigger government unless they feel it adds value to their lives," he said.

Shaub urged those studying the health department to focus instead on how it could improve residents' lives.

Shirk echoed Shaub's concern that the proposal would be seen as unnecessary "big government." "We don't need more government just for the sake of more government," she said. "We want to be able to provide the public with the information needed so they can decide whether or not this makes sense."