

Baldwin County Mental Health, AltaPointe merger questioned

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The Baldwin County Mental Health Center has plans to merge with AltaPointe Health Systems, but the merger has raised questions among some county officials.

The County Commission appoints Baldwin County Mental Health board members. The county also collects a 10 cent tax on cigarettes, a portion of which goes to the center.

The center, which is a public, nonprofit corporation that provide mental health services in Baldwin County, received \$4.8 million between fiscal years 2005 and 2013.

Baldwin County Mental Health, which will be known as AlaPointe Health Systems when the merger is complete, wants to continue to get the funding after the merger.

Baldwin County Mental Health also wants a letter of support from the Baldwin County Commission in regard to the merger, even though it does not believe that it needs the commission's approval to merge with AltaPointe.

The Baldwin County Commission will vote on the Baldwin County Mental Health's request for a letter of support and whether to amended a resolution so AltaPointe can get the cigarette tax money during an April 1 meeting.

"I don't understand this, and I'm not going vote for it," Commissioner Frank Burt Jr. said during Tuesday's commission work session. "I will tell them that."

Baldwin County Administrator David Brewer cautioned the commission during the meeting about the way the merger is being done.

"They say they want consent, but they don't need it. That's just unique," Brewer said.

He said thinks the law "envisions in some manner the consent of the governing body."

David Conner, Baldwin County's attorney, said based on his discussions about the merger the Baldwin County Mental Health Center's articles of incorporation are not being altered, so a County Commission vote on the merger is not needed.

When the merger is complete, AltaPointe will be overseen by a nine-member board, including three members who will be appointed by the Baldwin County Commission.

The merger is being achieved by AltaPointe, a government-funded health care organization that provides mental health care services in Mobile and Washington counties, amending its articles of incorporation, officials said.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health has approved of a resolution from AlaPointe's board authorizing the merger. The department wrote in a March 12 letter it finds the merger "in the public interest and accordingly approves AlataPointe's request."

Robin Riggins, Baldwin County Mental Health's executive director, said her agency's merger with AltaPointe will be a win-win for everyone involved.

"They are a total health care system where as we are just residential and outpatient at this point," she said. "This means a lot to us and to what we can provide in this county. They are dedicated to make sure that all the funding that we currently get for Baldwin services will remain in Baldwin. They need that as much as we do."

Riggins explained in a March 21 letter to Baldwin County Commission Chairman Skip Gruber why the merger is needed and what will be the benefits of it.

The letter cites expanded services that will result from the merger and AltaPointe's electronic medical records system coming to Baldwin County as among the benefits.

One of the reasons why Baldwin County Mental Health wants to merge with AltaPointe is because of a change to Alabama's Medicaid program, officials said.

"They are going to go from a fee for service to managed care, which is going put us in a difficult position to be able to provide the services we have been providing for years

under the reimbursement we would get under those guidelines," said Bob Wills, president of the Baldwin County Mental Health Center board.

Wills, Bay Minette's mayor, said another reason for the merger is financial.

He said Baldwin County Mental Health's budget is \$9 million budget, and AltaPointe's budget is \$67 million.

"That's one of the reasons or probably the primary reason we think this is really a necessity for us," Wills said. "They have got the horsepower to provides the capital, to provide the services so that we can continue to provide services as this new Medicaid payment process goes into place."

Wills said the merger is vital for Baldwin County Mental Health.

"This is just, frankly... this or nothing for us because in a period of a year or two we would probably be out of business," he said.