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C.O.N. hearings conclude

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Plenty of doctors, nurses, patients and businessmen gave their testimony Thursday on whether Madison County needs a new St. Dominic Hospital, which would have the most basic level of trauma care, in addition to Madison River Oaks, which is already under construction in Canton. It will also provide the most basic trauma care.

But, the decision will come down to one issue: Does St. Dominic's request for a Certificate of Need, or C.O.N., meet the state's guidelines?

"The issue is the Certificate of Need application does not comply with the state health plan," said Tom Kirkland, attorney for the Madison County Medical Center, which will be closing and transferring its 67 beds to Madison River Oaks. "It says no additional hospital in Madison County at this time, based on its relationship to the other counties in the service area."

Ed Brunini, attorney for St. Dominic Hospital, disagreed. "We're entitled to relocate beds as opposed to building a new hospital. We believe the state health plan authorizes what we have requested," he said.

H.M.A. owns Madison River Oaks. In their argument against the C.O.N., attorneys for H.M.A. pointed to a letter from several years ago where St. Dominic turned down the Madison County Medical Center's request for St. Dominic to take over the struggling hospital. The letter stated, "We have concluded we would not be able to provide the medical services sought by the hospital."

"We felt it was very difficult for a Catholic hospital to impress some of our limitations on women's services on a formerly public hospital," Brunini said.

The hearing officer will decide whether the C.O.N. criteria has been met. The matter will then go to the State Health Officer, Dr. Mary Currier. Either party has the opportunity to appeal. The final outcome may be five months away.

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