

2010: ‘Year of the hospital’

City, county announce joint ACH review

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In a show of solidarity about the future of Allen County, Iola city and Allen County commissioners joined their support in taking a “hard look” at Allen County Hospital to see if the structure meets the needs of the future. The commissioners used Thursday night’s Thrive Allen County banquet to announce the joint effort. “We don’t always agree on everything,” Dick Works, chairman of the county commission, said of the two governing bodies. “But too often it is forgotten that we do agree on 95 percent” of how best to serve constituents. Putting the needs of the county hospital on the front burner is necessary, Works said, to ensure its survival. “We must work aggressively and cooperate as a county if we are going to stop losing our patients to Chanute, Fort Scott, Burlington and Parsons. “We owe it to the people who came before us, and to our children and grandchildren to quit talking about how things should be and start doing something to effect change. “2010 is the year of the hospital.” Commissioners, all save Rob Francis, who was out of town, sealed the commitment with a round of handshakes. The news was greeted with a standing ovation by a crowd of about 300 at Madison Avenue Steaks and Chops. The dinner was the second annual for Thrive Allen County, a relatively new non-profit organization dedicated to improve the health and safety of Allen County residents. The focus of the night was to recognize accomplishments of organizations and communities throughout the county that have partnered with Thrive.

MORAN was the night’s big winner for its “dramatic turnaround” as a community, said presenter Alan Weber, a member of the Thrive board of directors. Over the past year a “small but dedicated group of area residents” worked with Thrive members to bring the town together to achieve three goals: Be designated as a Kansas PRIDE community; establish a swim bus to transport children from the

communities of Savonburg, Elsmore, Mildred and Moran to Iola Municipal Pool two days a week; and construct a walking trail. More than 60 youngsters took advantage of the swim bus to Iola, said Kathy Ward, who accepted the award on behalf of her town. Moran won “The Donna,” named after the late Donna Talkington, who was “a pillar of civic life in Allen County,” said Weber. Bestowing the award for community excellence was “bittersweet,” Weber said, because of Talkington’s death earlier this year. Other winners included the after-school program SAFE BASE in the health and wellness category for its dental screenings during enrollment of the county’s three school districts. More than 4,300 dental screenings were conducted this year with more than 600 children referred for follow-up treatments with money provided by the REACH Healthcare Foundation. The screenings also included checks for head lice and provided kits of school supplies, toothbrushes, toothpaste and floss as well as head lice removal kits for those who needed them. Elsmore, population 67, won the recreation award for its concerted effort between area citizens, its Ruritan club and members of the Allen County Community College baseball team to secure playground equipment. It’s the first time since its elementary school closed in 1994 that the community has had such equipment, now a focal highlight of many gatherings about town. Iola’s Sesquicentennial Committee won the award in the education division for providing a year’s worth of educational and cultural programs about the history of Iola. Sesquicentennial volunteers engaged civic groups, non-profits, city government and everyday residents in its efforts to provide new and creative learning opportunities from poetry readings to co-sponsoring the July 4 Charley Melvin Mad Bomber Run for Your Life in which more than 400 registrants participated.

IN ITS FOUR years, Thrive Allen County has grown from a fledgling group of do-gooders to an organization that is making considerable social and economic impact on local communities, said David Toland, Thrive executive director. Thrive’s finances depend largely on grants. Up until this year, the REACH Healthcare Foundation of Kansas City was its primary source of funding, allowing an annual budget of about \$50,000. Today, funding from REACH, the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City and the Kansas Healthcare Foundation make up the bulk of the current budget of more than \$300,000 — a sixfold increase in one year’s time. “By diversifying our revenue sources we

increase the likelihood of withstanding the financial storms that can hit small organizations when a key funder has financial problems of its own,” Toland said. “We need to diversify more, but we’re headed in the right direction.” That money makes its way through Allen County with programs and partnerships. A \$25,000 survey of the health and recreation habits of Allen County residents — funded by the county, city of Iola and USD 257 — has already had a return of \$125,000 in investments to the county, Toland said, including projects for the Elm Creek Community Garden, bike routes in Humboldt, and help in securing the Vision Iolan project which will help design uses for lands flooded in 2007 as well as help design walkways and bike paths in Iola. Thrive’s goal of purchasing goods and services from Allen County vendors has pumped \$200,000 into the county this year, Toland said.

THRIVE’S GOAL of fostering healthy lifestyles is the linchpin to Allen County’s success, said Iola native Richard Zahn. As a former chief executive officer for a New Jersey-based global pharmaceutical company, Zahn’s role as keynote speaker for the banquet was a perfect fit. Zahn said a focus of his career in biotechnology and pharmaceuticals was not so much on health but rather illness and how poor health is costly to a society. A chain of events can follow if a healthy work force is at its core, Zahn said. Healthy people make strong workers who drive commercial growth which fosters robust communities. Vibrant communities offer important services such as good medical care and schools which not only make for stronger and smarter people, but also create a solid foundation upon which future generations can build their lives. “On and on it goes. One factor is connected to the next in an infinite loop. But it all begins with health,” Zahn said. Zahn challenged the audience to think how as a county they could capitalize on Thrive’s goals of health and wellness. He put out some suggestions of his own including Allen County becoming a hub for geriatric care as well as for health care in general. “I can see this place as one day being a model for the nation — where all kids are safe and healthy. “Can you imagine a magazine article hailing Allen County as the best place for senior citizens in America? I can.” Zahn challenged the audience to consider education as a goal, including becoming a center for literacy or a “Project Graduate” with a goal of a 100-percent high school graduation rate. Zahn predicted that if communal goals were set, “Allen County could be an example for the

entire country: A rural community in America's breadbasket that transformed itself through hard work, a sensible shift in attitudes and behaviors and a commitment to help each other reach goals."

AS ROSY as the year has been, there's every reason to expect an even brighter 2010, Toland said. The citizens of LaHarpe have started the ball rolling with their own Thrive-based visioning which has already worked to secure the LaHarpe Elementary School for \$1 from USD 257 with hopes that it be used in part as a community center. Mainly through its expertise in grant-writing, Thrive personnel have helped Elm Creek Community Gardens, Big Brothers Big Sisters and all of the county's cities vie for grants. Thrive also plans to continue its successful Allen County Meltdown which attracted 379 Allen Countians to lose weight over a 12-week period this past spring. The next meltdown starts Jan. 9. The Charley Melvin Mad Bomber Run For Your Life is also a go for July 10.