

BULLETIN

Working to protect services in a smaller community

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by DAN KEETON



n Joan Magee's case, working part time doesn't mean spending more time on the couch. "It frees me up to do other things during the week," said the lab technologist and HSA's chief steward at Cariboo Regional Hospital.

Joan Magee Chief steward & medical technologist Cariboo Regional Hospital

The community of Williams Lake benefits from Magee's activism. She has been working with others in the local health coalition to try to raise awareness about and prevent the closure of an extended care facility and seniors' home. There's no doubt, though, that it's an uphill fight.

Magee works part time by choice, mainly on weekends and on-call. This allows her time to attend to several duties, including representing HSA on the labour council, and as a director of her NDP constituency association.

And then there's endurance riding. But more about that later.

The issue occupying Magee's time for past several months centres around a decision by the Interior Health Authority to close two popular facilities and contract the services to a private, for-profit firm.

Deni House is an extended care facility attached to the hospital. Cariboo Lodge houses seniors in Williams Lake's downtown — which is exactly where it should be, Magee contends.

"They're right near seniors' facilities and the library is nearby," she said. "When we have the Stampede Parade the residents can come out and watch it. There's a children's playground just across the street." Magee worries that the proposed new location will only isolate the residents. "Where they want them to move to is just a bare field," she said.

The health authority's justification for closing Deni House, a facility which opened only 15 years ago, is that its four-beds-per-room system doesn't address privacy concerns. Magee finds that reasoning specious: "For some of the residents, privacy simply isn't an issue," she said. "We know there could have been changes to make it a viable facility without closing it."

Both Deni House and Cariboo Lodge are to be consolidated under the same roof at a new privatized facility. To

build it at a location several kilometres from downtown required rezoning for a piece of land. That's where Williams Lake city council came in.

"It was a very hotly contested issue," Magee said. At city hall there were 19 speakers, with only two including the developer in favour of rezoning the land. But even with three councillors opposed, the mayor cast the tie-breaking vote in favour of rezoning.

Magee thinks the city and the regional health authority are doing local health care a disservice. She points out that in most communities there is a choice between private and public facilities, such as seniors and long term care homes. In Williams Lake, that choice is being taken away.

"We were all happy with what we have," she said, adding that the new seniors facilities will have 30 fewer beds than currently available.

She points out too that the privatization will throw some 200 health care employees out of work. With the Liberal government's changes to the Labour Code, those workers have lost successorship rights. They won't be transferred to the new facility with the collective agreement rights they have achieved through bargaining. And the jobs in the private facilities will likely pay in the order of \$9-\$10 per hour. Most of the laid-off workers are members of the Hospital Employees Union, says Magee. "Quite frankly, I think the government's trying to break the union."

Health employees and activists like Magee were also hamstrung by a gag order imposed by their employer. "We knew certain things were coming, but we were forbidden to speak out about it."

The health coalition is still fighting to save at least one of the facilities and is working to minimize the impact on the seniors.

A member of HSA since the union's formation in 1971, Magee acknowledges she had originally been content to let someone be the steward and take care of everything. Her union activity began in 1994 when she replaced a colleague as a delegate to the HSA convention.

"I was really impressed with how well things were run. I went back home and said, "Yes, I'll be a steward."

Magee is now a Member-at-Large for her region, and has sat on the resolutions and education committees. "One thing I've found is that HSA offers so many educational opportunities," she said. "There are so many courses to expand your knowledge." Among her favourites are critical incident debriefing, public speaking, letter writing and member mobilization courses. She is also enthusiastic about an anti-harassment workshop and recent sessions on human rights.

Magee began her career in 1969 in Manitoba. She was captivated by BC during a vacation visit in 1970 and moved to Williams Lake soon after. She has grown children, including a son who works in the same lab.

And when her other duties aren't demanding her time, Magee indulges her passion for distance riding that's horse riding, for distances that sometimes stretch several hundred kilometers. She has travelled Canada and the United States for competitions and has just recently become active again in the sport.

Her advice to her colleagues is to get involved in HSA. "Go to any conventions or sessions you can. It's valuable just to talk to others from around the province."

Magee also credits other union stewards in her hospital for helping her learn the ropes. And she continues to enjoy her position as chief steward for HSA, "a great ethical union." 

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