

## HEALTH CARE

### Andi Atwater

News-Press Fort Myers

Panel committed to trauma centers

BY ANDI ATWATER [aatwater@news-press.com](mailto:aatwater@news-press.com)

A collaboration of residents from the five-county area served by Southwest Florida's only **trauma center** committed Wednesday to support and guide efforts to keep the cash-strapped operation open.

Ten representatives from Lee, Collier, Hendry, Glades and Charlotte counties joined Lee Memorial Health System leaders in the first Regional Advisory Committee on trauma services.

The group's function will be to advise the legislatively created Lee County Trauma Services District and, ultimately, seek to sustain the **trauma center** - in jeopardy of closing due to a lack of money and specialty physicians.

"The only thing I want is a **trauma center**," said Collier County Commissioner Jim Colletta. "I think our objective is simple: the presence of a **trauma center** in Southwest Florida and to make sure it exists in the future."

The group, expected to meet quarterly, is a diverse mix of residents, from circuit court officials to civic activists, some who were critical of Lee Memorial's failed bid for a half-cent sales tax in 2002 to support trauma and other emergency services around Lee County.

While that tax failed, some lessons from it were well-learned.

Although the regional advisory committee will weigh in on the **trauma center's** future, its creation is a support-building tactic employed by Lee Memorial, whose officials now include the public in almost every major critical endeavor or controversial exploration.

"One of the lessons the board took from that experience was the need to now involve stakeholders in every step of the process," said committee co-Chairman Pete Doragh. "I think we all acknowledge the trauma district is a regional program and certainly it ought to be responsive to the people and the region it serves."

This is particularly important as lawmakers mull over ways to pay for Florida's 20 remaining trauma centers, health officials said.

While at least two bills in the works look to increase certain traffic fines, a specific bill that would allow Lee County residents to vote on a trauma-specific sales tax hit the skids.

"This committee will be of vital importance to keep the momentum going and for the **trauma center** to be the focal point," said former nurse Isabel Gutentag of North Fort Myers.

Without regional support sending a strong message to Tallahassee and to residents, the **trauma center** may not make it, said Fort Myers activist Erleene Sanders.

"I think for the **trauma center** to survive on a basis that it doesn't ever have to worry about funding again, it has to be a regional effort," she said.

Lee Memorial officials say the **trauma center** needs about \$10 million a year to support the operations and the specialty physicians who sustain it.

## MEMBERS OF THE REGIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON TRAUMA SERVICES

### Public members

Joe Flint, Glades County, clerk of circuit court

Sal Grosso, Cape Coral, committee co-chairman

Maureen Garrard, Charlotte County, aide to Rep. Lindsay Harrington

Isabel Gutentag, North Fort Myers

Erleene Sanders, Fort Myers

Richard Helms, Fort Myers

Carol Barclay, League of Women Voters president

Patricia Harrington Baird, Hendry County

Jim Colletta, Collier County commissioner

Brian Griffin, North Fort Myers, co-chairman of Lee County Smart Growth