

FAA gives green light to hospital

Agency rules Seagate does not pose hazard

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Watsonville Community Hospital's proposed new site off Airport Boulevard does not pose a threat to airport safety, according to a report released by the Federal Aviation Agency Friday.

That finding puts the hospital one step closer to its plans to renovate the existing Seagate building and create a three-story, modern 110,000-square-foot acute-care hospital and doctors' offices there.

The hospital was damaged during the 1989 earthquake. Hospital officials began looking into building elsewhere after the Federal Emergency Management Agency determined that the cost of repairing the building was more than half the cost of constructing a new one. In such cases, FEMA won't pay for repairs, but will cover new construction.

The hospital's plans have been criticized by some community members, including pilots who are concerned about safety and potential land-use conflicts between the airport and the proposed hospital, which sits just across the street from one of the runways.

Hospital spokeswoman Cory Allen said the FAA doesn't approve or disapprove projects like the hospital, but makes rulings as to their compatibility with airports.

Specifically, the FAA has ruled that the new hospital "will not be an obstruction to the airport and will not be a hazard to air navigation," according to a hospital press release. A spokesman for the FAA could not be reached for comment by press time.

The FAA statement notes that the nearest portion of the proposed site is about 1,300 feet from

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the approach end of one runway. Once the hospital has obtained approval from the city and other jurisdictions, the FAA said it would accept the new hospital "from an airspace utilization standpoint."

Allen said the FAA has also said the hospital does not need special markings or lighting to warn pilots of its presence.

"I hope (this finding) would suggest to the community that the hospital and the airport will be here together for a long time," Allen said. In fact, she said, having the two close together could be critical should another disaster, such as the Loma Prieta quake, occur.

Allen was unsure about whether approval of a proposed heliport for the new building was included in the FAA finding.

The hospital now expects hearings with the city on a special use permit to begin in mid-June, and that renovations to the Seagate building could begin as soon as the end of the summer or early fall.

The acute-care portion of the building will have to be constructed from the ground up, because the existing building, a former computer components factory, doesn't meet hospital code. Plans for that construction will be submitted to the state for approval at about the time renovations begin, and Allen expects the approval process to take about a year.

The hospital still plans to open the new building by mid-1997.

A final draft of an environmental assessment report, put together by FEMA, is expected to be out soon, Allen said. The initial draft favored the Seagate site, and Allen has said the hospital has heard that the final draft will do the same.

The draft report relied solely on airport safety research done by a consultant hired by the hospital. Bill Dickerson, a spokesman for the Coalition for Responsible Airport Management and Planning, a group that opposes the hospital, sent a long letter to FEMA outlining his concerns and criticisms of the way the airport safety section was handled. He said his group would go "straight to the top" at FEMA if the issues he raised were not addressed in the final draft.

Allen said the hospital hopes to meet with pilots soon in an attempt to reach an agreement. A number of public forums on plans for the new hospital are also planned.

Once the final FEMA report is released, a second environmental impact report, required by state law, will have to be prepared. Allen said she believes the state will rely heavily on the FEMA findings.

The cost of the project, including land acquisition, is \$67.4 million. Awaiting favorable environmental impact reports, FEMA has agreed to pay most of the cost in the form of grants and loans, with the rest coming from a grant from the state Office of Emergency Services and a loan from Seagate.