

HOSPITALS Watsonville Hospital New hospital chief chosen in Watsonville

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WATSONVILLE — A man who started his career as a licensed vocational nurse has been picked to run Watsonville Community Hospital.

John P. Friel, 46, took over as chief executive officer this week at a time when the board of directors is closing in on a decision about the shape of a new hospital.

"What drew me here was the fine reputation the hospital has had over the years, the community and the whole area," Friel said.

He received nursing training at Massachusetts General Hospital, and then worked as a licensed vocational nurse at a community hospital in a Boston suburb.

In the late 1960s, said Friel, his draft board allowed him to complete a three-year registered nursing program in exchange for two years of nursing corps work in the Air Force afterward.

He was commissioned as a first lieutenant and assigned to Travis Air Force Base — his first taste of California — where he worked with wounded patients coming in from Vietnam.

In 1972, he left the service and joined the staff at Marin General Hospital in Greenbrae as a critical care supervisor and manager of central purchasing.

Friel said his four years there were his first in management, and he spent his off hours getting a business management degree from California State University, Sonoma.

He graduated from there in 1975, and then was accepted into the graduate program in health administration at UCLA. He graduated in 1978.

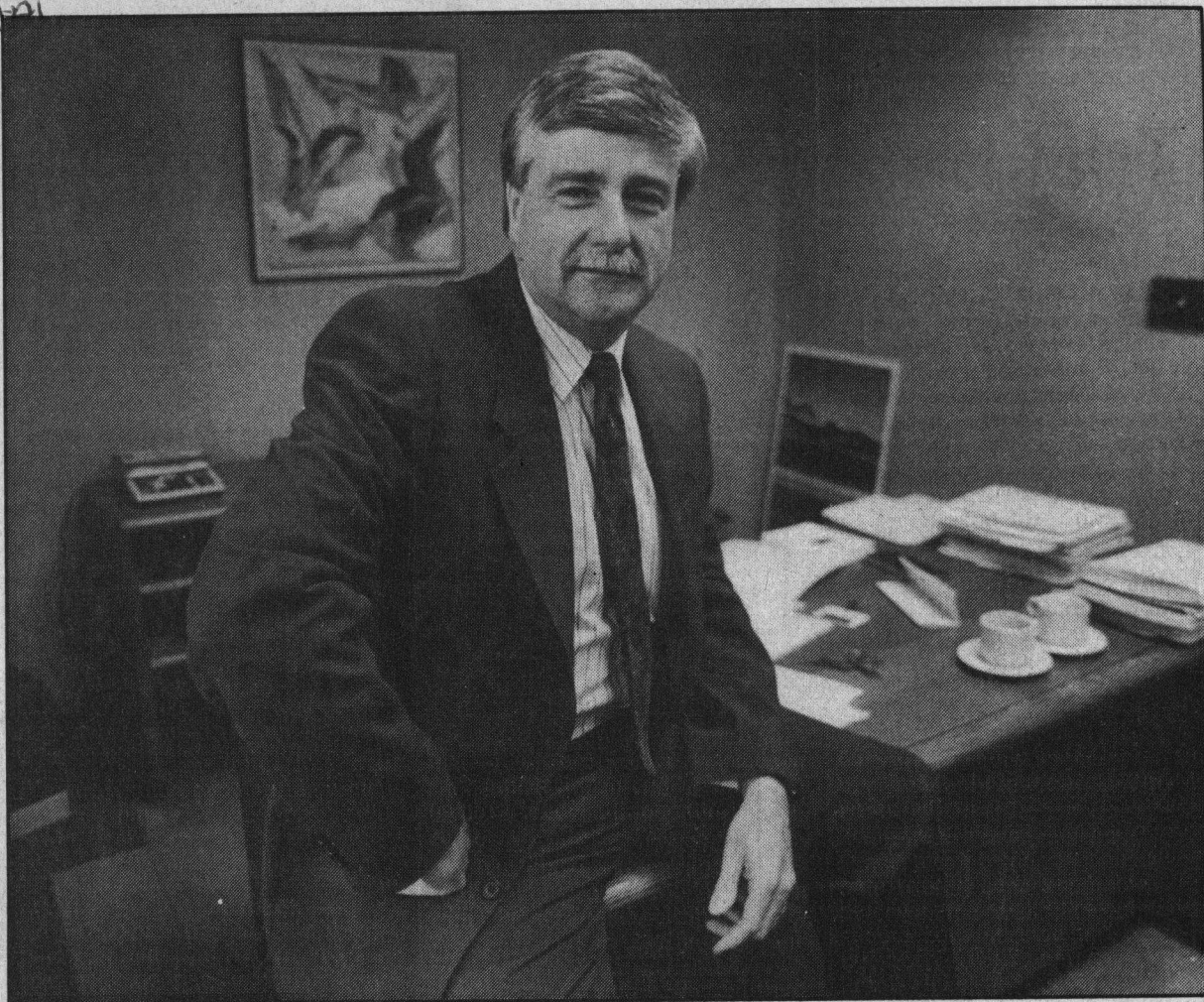
Friel took a job as assistant administrator at Brookside Hospital in Contra Costa County, where he worked until 1982.

He then joined Herrick Hospital and Health Center in Berkeley as an associate administrator, working there through a merger that made him senior vice president for hospital operations.

His next job as project coordinator of the new Valley Care Health Systems' 28-acre medical facility in Pleasanton will be a help to Watsonville as it builds its new hospital, he said.

Friel, who said the board hadn't made a decision about where in Watsonville to build, agreed with consultant Jeff Goldsmith that what's needed is a "hospital of the future."

The new facility will replace the existing earthquake-damaged hospital at a cost of nearly \$50 million.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Former vocational nurse John P. Friel will help Watsonville Hospital move into the future.

Former Chief Executive Officer Paul Estess negotiated a \$40 million payment for the new building from the Federal Emergency Management Administration before he resigned for personal reasons in September.

Consultant Goldsmith was hired the next month to determine what kind of hospital would be necessary to serve the needs of Watsonville.

Both Friel and Goldsmith said they envision a facility that caters more to the needs of out-patients, who far outnumber people admitted to the hospital because of changes in medical services.

"Any administrator would love the opportunity to build a new hospital," said Friel, who added that the Oct. 17, 1989, earthquake might be considered a blessing in disguise for Watsonville.

Remodeling a hospital to accommodate changing patient needs is difficult, he said, because so many of

them were built with an orientation for in-patient services.

"This community has a very great opportunity," said Friel, who estimated a new building won't be nearing completion for up to three years.

Friel said his priorities will be to "listen to the community" and determine how the hospital can meet the needs of Watsonville and the surrounding area.

High on his agenda, he said, is learning more about the lack of out-patient tubal ligation services for Medi-Cal patients in Santa Cruz County.

Dominican, which took over Community Hospital last year, won't provide the service because of religious reasons and Watsonville can't provide them for poor out-patients because of low Medi-Cal reimbursement rates.

"That's something I'll need to look into," promised Friel.