

Watsonville approves hospital construction

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WATSONVILLE — The City Council cleared the way Tuesday for Watsonville Community Hospital to rebuild a \$67 million complex near Highway 1.

The reconstruction was planned after the hospital was damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. But efforts to rebuild have been hampered by a series of delays that included a failed lawsuit by pilots concerned with the new hospital's proximity to the city airport.

On Tuesday, the council allowed a building permit to be issued for the new hospital and denied a developer's opposition to the project.

"We're delighted ... to finally get to this level and finally build," said John Friel, hospital president and Chief Executive Officer.

Construction of the complex, which includes a 98-bed facility, a heliport and day care center, should begin by April or May at the former Seagate Technology site, hospital officials said. State approval of architectural plans and the closing of escrow is expected soon.

William Burgstrom, of Burgstrom-Kramer Inc. of Watsonville, appealed the city Planning Commission's Jan. 17 decision to allow a building permit, saying that the hospital's helicopter pad threatens his ability to build on his adjacent property.

Burgstrom argued before the council that the heliport's flight approach limits its building heights on his property, hurts his ability to attract bigger industries and causes too much noise.

"I can't think of anyone who'd want a helicopter flying (close) over their building," said Burgstrom. He also ob-

jected to a plan that allows a hospital on a 27-acre site formerly zoned for industrial use, which he said would not help the city's high unemployment rate.

The council's 6-1 approval received emotional opposition by Councilman Lowell Hurst, who argued that noise from a helipad would bother residents in the nearby Monterey Vista Mobile Estates.

Friel pointed out that the helicopter makes only about two trips a month. Noise is further minimized, he said, because the helicopter does not hover, but lands and shuts off its engine.

When a city staff member said there had been no written or verbal protests from mobile home residents, Hurst said the night meeting was "past the bedtime" for most elderly mobile home residents. "I suppose we won't get complaints until after it takes place," Hurst

said.

Hospital administrators have planned to rebuild the hospital since 1989, when the present building at Green Valley and Holohan roads was structurally damaged during the earthquake. Since then, millions have been spent to make the building temporarily safe.

In other action, the city postponed a decision that would allow Sonic Cable to sell its franchise to TCI Cablevision of California Inc. A Sonic attorney called the city Tuesday to allow a 30-day extension. Assistant City Manager Gary Smith said he hopes the extension allows the city to address problems with Sonic before the franchise is sold. Those include poor picture quality, more channels and improved programming, and money the city says it is owed by Sonic.