

Empty hospital for sale

Hospitals - Watsonville
Agriculture group,
school district
consider possibilities

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WATSONVILLE — With the move of Watsonville Community Hospital to its new quarters near the airport, the question of what to do with the old facility is still being explored.

A reuse committee made up of hospital staff, community and business leaders had been looking into alternative uses for the building, but they ceased holding meetings last summer when an acceptable use for the site failed to materialize.

Hospital Vice President Barbara Shengai said the original goal of the committee was to set up a joint agency and continue to operate the old facility, but that did not come about. She said the decision to sell the building, which carries a price tag of \$8 million, was made recently.

Damaged in the 1989 earthquake, the building was no longer acceptable under state standards for hospital use, but it is still viable for other uses which do not require such stringent code specifications. "For it to remain a hospital we would have had to replace the first floor," Shengai said. "That would have taken longer and been more expensive than building the new facility."

One group working on a proposal to purchase the entire property is the Economic Development/Agricultural Resource Center Steering

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Committee, comprised of members of the local community, university and county officials and a representative of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rich Casale.

Committee member Dale Skillicorn said his group has put together a proposal for a center jointly operated by local, state and federal agencies in order to provide a West Coast center for agricultural related issues as well as a resource center.

"One of the things we would like to accomplish is the establishment of a species bank where endangered species would actually be grown to replace those lost to agricultural and commercial development," Skillicorn said. "Sites have already been identified throughout the valley."

Other uses of the facility would be to promote international agricultural marketing and research and to provide conference facilities.

To acquire the necessary funds, Skillicorn says his group has been talking to the USDA, the U.S. De-

partment of the Interior and various local funding sources. "We have been working on this for a year," Skillicorn said, "and it is now coming together very quickly."

Another potential user of the building is the Pajaro Valley Unified School District. Currently the district's offices are located on Watsonville High School property and that space is now needed for school expansion. "We are looking at the hospital along with other possible

sites," said PVUSD Superintendent John Casey. "The hospital is one of the options. We have no set timelines at this point but Watsonville High will have to eventually be expanded. When that happens the district office services will have to be relocated."

Shengai said there have been other agencies making inquiries into the purchase of the facility, but there are no solid deals on the table yet.