

✓ Hospital heads back to normalcy

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Hospital
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WATSONVILLE — It may take three weeks for Watsonville Community Hospital to get back to normal, after the resolution Thursday of a five-day strike by registered nurses.

Voting 127-0 Thursday morning, the nurses accepted a labor contract giving them an 18-percent pay raise over the next three years, at annual increments of 5, 6 and 7 percent, according to Paul Estess, the hospital's chief economic officer. The settlement makes the nurses the highest-paid in the county.

The key to the accord was Estess' proposal for benefits. All nurses, including the 120 or so part-time employees, will receive fully paid health benefits under a newly created "health maintenance organization" plan that requires the nurses to seek medical care through Watsonville Community Hospital, if the care is available.

The projected savings allowed the hospital to raise its last wage offer by 2 percent, breaking the impasse that had led to the strike last Saturday. The HMO plan eventually will be offered to all hospital employees, Estess said.

"Everyone saw the hospital would benefit from that. I didn't hear one dissenting comment on that (plan)," said Willard Hatch, the chief negotiator for the California Nurses' Association, which represents 171 registered nurses at the hospital.

Although the hospital didn't close during the strike, operations were severely curtailed. Estess predicted it would be "three weeks before we're really back in full swing."

The emergency room should be in full service by today, Estess said, and other hospital units will reopen as demand dictates.

Several patients who were sent to other facilities in the county during the strike have requested a transfer

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back to Watsonville, he added.

Both Hatch and Estess praised the settlement, saying it was reached through joint compromises and a desire to settle the dispute quickly.

"I don't feel there were any losers, except that the strike happened," said Hatch. "Both sides want good relationships."

They also lauded the help of Teamsters Local 912 leaders, Sergio Lopez and Leon Ellis, who called the meeting Wednesday at the Seaclyff Inn. Lopez and Ellis presided over the 1½-year-long strike by Teamsters against frozen-food processors.

At that meeting, Estess had the hospital Board of Directors treasurer, Russ Egan, at his side. Egan is the controller for Norcal/Crosetti Foods, Inc., which took over when Watsonville Canning and Frozen Foods Co. collapsed.

Lopez managed to convince Hatch that the hospital is losing money. The pitch worked. Estess persuaded Hatch that the finances of the hospital "today vs. three years from now are very different," Estess said.

Estess took over the hospital administrator's position just eight months ago and, by his own description, "has several very large balls in motion" that should result in more revenue for the hospital in the future.