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County frustrated by its lack of clout in health-care planning

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As the biggest customer of medical services in Santa Cruz County, the county government wants a little more clout in health-care planning.

The county should explore "what we can do with clout ... maybe we should get involved in court suits," Supervisor Gary Patton said yesterday during a discussion of the county's stance on proposals for new hospitals.

Patton's remarks came during a lengthy board discussion on the proposed Capitola Health Center, a 24-bed hospital that would specialize in non-critical care. His reference to lawsuits did not mention any specific action.

The county has an obligation to work toward seeing that health care is operated for the public good, supervisors said in a resolution suggested by Health Services Administrator Elli Hall. The board also agreed to look into ways of getting involved in health-care planning in the county.

The resolution also asks that any new hospitals allow community involvement in decision-making, and that hospitals ensure that they take their "fair share" of people who are on Medi-Cal and can't afford to pay for their care.

The county has no direct power over hospitals, but it could withhold health-care contracts from hospitals that don't meet the resolutions criteria. The county con-

tracts for health care for its 2,000 employees and the indigent. Doctors are often reluctant to accept Medi-Cal patients because the government reimbursement is low — about 33 percent on the dollar, said Dr. Ira Lubell, county health officer.

Capitola Health Center has already agreed to accept Medi-Cal patients, but supervisors were concerned that Capitola might take only a small portion of them. Critics of the Capitola Health Center say it would siphon off lucrative medical services from Dominican and Watsonville hospitals.

Dominican and Watsonville would then have to raise prices to

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make up for the lost revenue, Capitola project opponents say.

Capitola Health Center will try to meet the county's standards and is working on a contract for treating Medi-Cal patients, spokeswoman Kay Bowden told supervisors.

That contract would be a "health maintenance organization" that would allow Medi-Cal people to be treated on a regular basis at the health center.

The health center has been approved by the Capitola Planning Commission and is awaiting final approval by the City Council.

Supervisor Patton said the Capitola issue is less important than the merger of AMI Community and Dominican Santa Cruz hospitals last year.

He expressed concern that the merger has reduced competition in North County health care, and that there is no longer a hospital that performs sterilizations of women in North County. Dominican, which is operated by a Roman Catholic order, does not perform the procedure because it conflicts with Catholic beliefs.

Dominican officials say the merger has helped reduce costs by eliminating duplication of services, and Health Services Administrator Hall confirmed that by saying the county has seen a number of its costs for indigent care at Dominican decrease since the merger.

Patton said he was glad to hear that costs had decreased, but said he is concerned about the effects of a monopoly once the federal government stops looking at whether anti-trust laws were violated when the hospitals merged.