

Sutter in talks to buy drive-in

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SANTA CRUZ — Sutter Health is in negotiations to buy Skyview Drive-In, also home to a weekend flea market, two Santa Cruz institutions.

Rick Nichols, administrator of Sutter Maternity and Surgical Center, confirmed Tuesday that discussions with the property owners are under way.

"We know we'll have to expand and accommodate more physicians," he said, explaining the hospital's interest.

Sutter Health opened a hospital in 1996 next to the Skyview Drive-In, which is at 2260 Soquel Drive.

A network of health care providers, Sutter operates in more than 100 Northern California communities. Locally, its providers include the Santa Cruz Medical Foundation clinics and the Visiting Nurse Association of Santa Cruz County in addition to the 30-bed hospital.

The Skyview's 14-acre site has not been on the market, Nichols said. It's been owned for decades by the Martin family, Evelyn and her husband Marvin, and since her husband's death, her brother-in-law.

The drive-in, which opened in July 1949, is the only one on the Central Coast. It shows first-run films like "Blades of Glory" and "Grindhouse" on two screens, charging adults \$6 apiece.

See **DRIVE-IN** on **PAGE A5**



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

Skyview Drive-In patrons visit the snack bar as 'Pirates of the Caribbean' shows last summer.

Drive-in

Continued from Page A1

Since 1971, the property also has been home to a weekend flea market that attracts several hundred vendors. The entry fee is \$2.50 per person, and visitors describe it as a paradise for bargain-hunters.

Asked about the negotiations, office staff at the Skyview Flea Market declined to comment.

Nichols anticipated negotiations would take a while, and should they prove successful, changes would not take place immediately, he said.

"We have no immediate plans for [the property]," Nichols said. "We would continue the theater and the flea market for a couple of years."

Sutter officials also have looked at the downtown Sentinel property, which is on the market.

While details of the Sutter expansion haven't been mapped out, Nichols said the biggest need is for primary care physicians. The Santa Cruz Medical Foundation has 43 doctors specializing in primary care, 16 providing "urgent care," and 72 specialists.

Primary care physicians are in short supply countywide because of the high cost of living and the relatively low federal reimbursement rate for treating patients who are eligible for Medicare.

When Santa Cruz County's first drive-in, the Starview, opened on Big Basin Way in Boulder Creek in 1947, the promoter described it as a novelty and a convenience for the elderly. The property was turned into a housing development in the 1950s.

The Starview in Watsonville had a longer run, until 1988. But the introduction of VCRs and DVDs, along with the end of cheap land, made it hard for drive-in theaters to survive.

The Skyview built up a huge following because of its weekend flea market with 400-some vendors.

In 1989, county supervisors hungry for sales tax revenue, struck a deal with local car dealers to create an auto plaza at the site without providing a home for the flea market. Flea market vendors were irate, however, and Live Oak

Supervisor Jan Beautz fought the use of redevelopment money to subsidize the purchase, and 10,000 people signed petitions to register their objections.

In the 1990s the Soquel school district looked at the land briefly as a potential school site. It was dropped from consideration due to potential opposition.

Beautz acknowledged that alternative sites for the flea market may be hard to find but she doesn't see the current situation as comparable to the discussions in 1989.

"If they [the owners] choose to sell it, that's different," she said. "I know people like the flea market, but people understand it's private property and someday it might go. Of course, that displaces the people who use the flea market."

In 1996, author Kerry Segrave, who wrote a history of drive-in movies, predicted the entertainment venue might last another 10 to 20 years.

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