

Medical center under review

No challenge to Dominican, developers say

By GREG BEEBE
Sentinel staff writer

CAPITOLA — The developers of a proposed medical center say they are not taking aim at Dominican Hospital, even though their facility could offer services — including abortions and tubal ligations — unavailable at the north county's lone hospital.

The proposed Capitola Health Center — touted as part of the new wave in health care — gets its first official review tonight by the city's Planning Commission. No decision is expected tonight.

The center, its developers say, would have the potential to offer reproductive surgery alternatives currently unavailable at Dominican, a nonprofit Catholic hospital.

"We're not under any religious directives (against performing abortions)," said Patricia O'Brien, senior vice president for Medical Surgical Management Inc., developers — along with a group of unnamed local physicians — of the proposed medical center.

O'Brien said it was "just a coinci-

dence" that capital-raising efforts for the center began at about the same time Dominican purchased its chief rival, Community Hospital, last spring. "The doctors first started talking about it earlier," O'Brien said.

"Health care is very competitive right now, but it's not in our plans to go after (Dominican)," she said.

Dominican Hospital officials declined to comment on the proposed medical center.

Medical Surgical Management and the "independent practice association" (IPA) of 60 local physicians want to build a medical office building, ambulatory surgical center, laboratories, and a 24-bed hospital wing on five acres of land in Capitola, between Nob Hill Foods and the intersection of Bay Street and Highway 1.

The hospital's rooms would be spacious, attractive and home-like, said O'Brien. "Birthing centers are the big rage these days, and in this facility more of the rooms will look like those in birthing centers."

Patients at Capitola Health Center, O'Brien said, will be "encouraged to get involved in their health care, based on the premise that if you have more control of your health care you're empowered and you can get healthier quicker."

The local physicians would own and control medical services provided by the medical center. Center developers

say this direct-contracting will "eliminate the cost of 'middle men.'"

O'Brien said, "the more administrative levels you have, the more expensive it gets."

"Usually, the hospital is very separate from its doctors. This system tries to link them all together so they all act in unison, all part of one team rather than having their own agendas."

Emphasis of medical care at the center would on "ambulatory care," or getting patients back on their feet as soon as possible, and preventive medicine.

The medical center will make every effort to honor all forms of private and public medical insurance, including Medicare and Medi-Cal, said O'Brien. The center has formed an advisory committee to make suggestions on the kinds of services the facility should offer.

As health care costs continue to rise, employers are looking for ways to stretch the benefit dollar, said Robert Palmer, personnel director for the county of Santa Cruz and a member of the Capitola Health Center advisory committee.

By focusing on preventive medicine, streamlining surgical care, and closely monitoring ("gatekeeping") lab tests and specialists, independent practice associations can keep overhead costs low, thus cutting insurance costs for employers, Palmer said.

"We're interested in watching the dollars," Palmer said. "Every dollar a large employer like the county spends on health care, he said, "is one less dollar that can go into salaries and other benefits."

Assuming that it receives the proper permits, the health center hopes to open its medical office building in May 1992 and its surgical center and hospital wing by January 1993.

Design review of the proposed medical center is under way, said associate planner Bob Rivers. The city's main concern, he said, is the center's effect on the already snarled traffic in the Bay Street-Highway 1 area.

The city also wants to make sure the center far enough away from the Soquel Creek flood plain and creek area.

Project approval, Rivers said, could be linked to future Bay Street traffic improvements by the state Department of Transportation.

The Capitola Planning Department has received calls from reproductive rights groups supporting the medical center, Rivers said. "What's real important is to let people know there are really two issues here and it's very easy to get them muddled."

"Planning is reviewing this project strictly as a land-use issue."

Capitola planning commissioners will take their first official look at the project at 7 tonight, City Hall. A decision is not likely on the project until Feb. 21.