

Still no progress in hospital talks

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SANTA CRUZ — It has been more than a month since county officials went public over their concern about stalled talks with Dominican Hospital, and there still has been no progress.

"My own sense is that the board of Dominican has not understood that the county really takes very seriously the consequences of their purchase of Community (Hospital)," said Supervisor Gary Patton, who represents the Santa Cruz and Bonny Doon areas, on Thursday.

At issue is a 14-point contract the county wants Dominican to sign that spells out such things as long-term rates, services and an expansion of the hospital's ability to serve non-English-speaking patients.

The contract is needed, said county officials, because Dominican bought Santa Cruz's only other hospital on March 9, and the potential for abuse has them concerned. Supervisor Fred Keeley, who

represents the San Lorenzo and Scotts Valley area, said last month that board is "skeptical of what has taken place."

Elinor Hall, county Health Services Agency administrator and the person who is negotiating with Dominican, said Thursday there has been "no progress" in the talks.

She refused to say whether a timeline has been established by the county that would give Dominican a deadline in settling on the 14 points, but she emphasized there will be an ending point.

"At some point, the county will take a position," said Hall. "The county will not study this forever. . . . We have taken the position that there are ways this could be good for the county and there are ways that it wouldn't be good, and we'd at some point have to say which it is."

Hall, who has been taking advice from a lawyer retained by supervisors to help them in this issue, said

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despite the lack of progress she remains optimistic.

Larry Donatoni, director of community relations for Dominican, also held out hope for continued cooperation.

"We have been in contact with the county and we are looking forward to sitting down with their key representatives to respond to issues they have raised," he said. "We're certainly taking them seriously."

But Patton said "it hasn't come across to me and, I think, the other board members" that Dominican seriously wants to negotiate a contract.

"I think now is not the time for advisory committees, now is the

time to sit down with the major players, including the county, and work out the significant differences between us," said Patton, referring to the community advisory board being developed by Dominican to get public opinion on health issues.

"They've bitten off more than they could really chew," said Patton.

That view was echoed by Betsy McCarty, chief of county Public Health, in personal observations addressed to members of the Public Health Commission on Wednesday.

"I think they're (Dominican officials) just overcommitted," she said in response to a question about progress on the talks from one of the health commissioners.

"They have so many things going on."

Jean Poulos, chairwoman of the commission and a nutritionist and diabetes educator, said her impression in working with Dominican staff these days is that "sometimes . . . you get the feeling one hand doesn't know what the other one is doing."

McCarty said her opinion is that contract talks have broken down over issues that include a set rate structure for county employees and indigent adults, the extension of the county's mental health program contract with Dominican, and the issue of reproductive rights.

"We can't seem to get it down to specifics," she said, emphasizing again that she was not speaking

for the county.

The reproductive rights issue is of particular concern to officials because Dominican, a Catholic hospital, has refused to offer tubal ligation sterilization to women.

County officials are also concerned that Dominican will try to get more south county patients, and undermine Watsonville Community Hospital at a time when that facility is facing grave financial difficulties.

Keeley held out the possibility that should talks break down the county could exercise other options, including talking with the Federal Trade Commission and the state Attorney General's Office regarding the monopoly issue facing Dominican.