

Watsonville will keep its hospital

Chairman rules out rebuilding in Aptos

By KEITH MURAOKA
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Watsonville residents won't be losing their hospital.

That is the word from Dr. John Hapee, chairman of Prime Health Systems, owner of the hospital — and it was exactly what residents want to hear.

Some 50 people attending a special joint meeting Monday of the Watsonville Community Hospital Board and the City Council made it clear they don't want to see a new hospital built in Aptos or elsewhere outside Watsonville.

A new \$48.9 million hospital will be built to replace the existing facility, which was severely damaged in the Oct. 17, 1989 earthquake.

Several speakers, including Councilman Oscar Rios, said they prefer the new hospital not only be built in Watsonville, but also be built closer to downtown or closer to Highway 1 than the existing Green Valley Road location.

After the meeting, Hapee said the new hospital "will be built in Watsonville.

"Building a hospital in Aptos is not the issue," Hapee said, although he added that some sort of out-patient surgery center is still under consideration for Aptos.

Sandra Grantz, acting chief executive officer of the hospital, said the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which is paying for the new facility, has agreed that building the new hospital would be cheaper than repairing the existing one. She called it a "golden opportunity" to react to the changing health-care needs of the community.

At the same time, hospital consultant Jeff Goldsmith said the federal monies don't have to be spent all on one place. So-called "satellite clinics" could possibly be built. The hospital has been considering building an out-patient surgery center in Aptos.

Prime Health Systems already owns two sites: 17 acres next to the existing 15-acre hospital site, and 12 acres behind the Seacliff Inn in Aptos.

Each location has its problems. The Watsonville site is prime agricultural land and is currently growing strawberries. The Aptos site may be too small for the hospital's needs.

The advantage of Aptos is that it

would boost the paying-patient population from the wealthier mid-county area. The south county has more patients who are poor and who are covered by government insurance programs. Those programs pay less to the hospital than what it costs to treat patients, contributing to the hospital's well-publicized financial problems. In September, the hospital cut \$1.8 million from its budget, including the elimination of 80 jobs.

At the forum, Watsonville residents expressed concern about the future location of the hospital and the kinds of services it would offer.

"Our college is gone, our airport is in jeopardy and now our hospital is in jeopardy," said resident Chuck Weisser. "We need a hospital in Watsonville." Another resident added, "You certainly wouldn't want Watsonville Community Hospital in Aptos. Shoot, you'd even have to change its name."

Others, like resident Erma Cody, expressed concern about trauma services (an emergency room and a critical care unit) possibly being discontinued in the new hospital. Dr. John Madsen, a hospital director, replied, "We haven't decided what type of trauma center we should have. It depends on what you want."

Councilwoman Betty Murphy noted, "I can't imagine the community standing for anything less than what we have today."

Still others pushed for "affordable" health care. Consultant Goldsmith conceded that the new hospital "will have to run on regular gas," meaning the hospital cannot continue to run in the red.

Goldsmith, who is with Integrated Medical Campus, which was hired earlier this month to evaluate health care alternatives, said that those changing health-care needs will be addressed in the new hospital.

For instance, less general acute care and more critical care, or community-based ambulatory/chronic care is foreseen, Goldsmith said. That care will come as more chronic illnesses will occur, such as arthritis, diabetes and Alzheimer's disease.

"We're going to see more diseases of aging as Baby Boomers fall apart," Goldsmith said.

Hospital officials added that they are only in the "very early stages of planning," which is why they're seeking community input.