

Hospital 5 - Watsonville. Hospital

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# Doctors back Watsonville hospital sale

By **DONNA KIMURA**  
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WATSONVILLE — A group of doctors stepped forward Thursday to say they back the sale of Watsonville Community Hospital.

They spoke out in an attempt to allay fears in the community over the pending sale of the non-profit hospital to the for-profit Community Health Systems of Tennessee. It was the first time that the doctors have made a public stand.

"The sale represents the best possible chance to keep health care in South County viable and beyond viable to grow," said Dr. Michael Suval, vice president of the Pajaro Valley Medical Group Inc.

The group represents about 70 family practice and medical-specialty physicians serving the Pajaro Valley. Almost all the doctors with priv-

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ileges at the hospital are group members.

Suval spoke out as the hospital sale is being reviewed by the state Attorney General's Office. The state has set an Aug. 1 public hearing on the deal.

The Watsonville City Council and other groups, however, have been pushing for a delay in the hearing since last week.

Mayor Dennis Osmer urged the council to request a postponement so the public can have more time to re-

view sale documents. The City Council meets Wednesday on the sale.

The Attorney General's Office also has called for an independent health impact study to be done to evaluate how the sale will affect the community.

Suval said he is confident the transaction will not change the hospital's services. He was joined by Drs. Fred Chen, Jeffrey Solinas and Lee Griffith.

The hospital spends \$1 million per year on indigent care and that will

not change, he said.

The Watsonville hospital needs the alliance to remain strong, said hospital President and Chief Executive Officer John Friel.

In 1995, the hospital borrowed \$20 million from the state on condition that it eventually become part of a larger system, he said.

Last year, financial losses meant about 70 people were laid off.

Chen said CHS is committed to not closing any departments while contributing \$9 million for capital improvements.

The hospital also will continue to be run by a board with local doctors and other representatives, he said.

People who have urged for a delay say they do not necessarily object to the sale, but only want more time to study the effects.