

Workers excited about new hospital

By JOHN BESSA
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Rocky Keith will have a place — aside from her own desk — for prospective hospital employees to take typing tests.

Betty Sutherland will have storage for the Service League coffee and gift shops — in the shops.

Patients will be able to walk out of a doctor's office to get X-rays or fill a prescription without leaving the building.

Workers and patients alike at Watsonville Community Hospital have a lot to look forward to, with a groundbreaking ceremony for its new \$67.4 million home planned today at the former Seagate building near Watsonville Airport.

"The community's been waiting a long time," said Cory Allen, director of marketing, planning and public relations for the hospital. "This is their project, too. It's not just ours."

Officials began planning for a new facility after the 1989 earthquake damaged the four-story hospital at Holohan and Green Valley roads.

After searching the area for a home, officials settled on the Seagate property, at Airport Boulevard and Nielson Road, said John

Friel, president and chief executive officer of the hospital. The 27-acre site cost \$18.9 million.

Building a new three-story hospital and renovating the 207,000-square-foot Seagate building account for more than half of the total project cost.

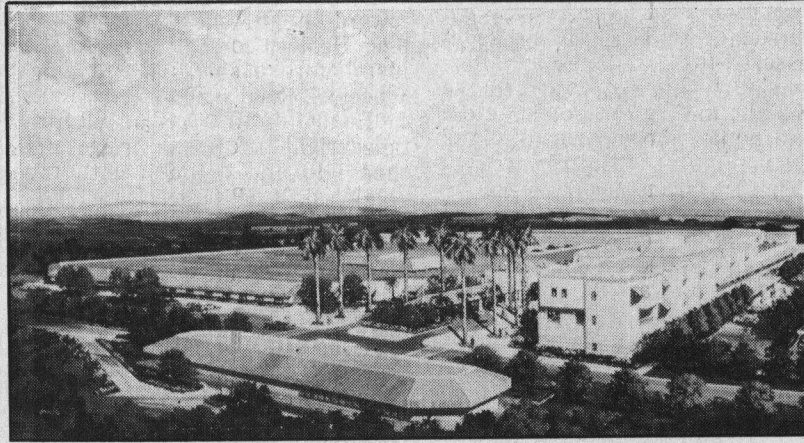
The Seagate building will house offices for doctors and hospital administrators because it does not meet stringent state building codes, said Wayne Runestrand, hospital project manager.

The new building, designed to withstand a magnitude-8 earthquake, will house the critical-care unit, emergency room, four operating rooms, birth rooms, and 100 patient beds, he said.

That is 30 fewer beds than the hospital has had since 1969, but the trend toward more outpatient procedures and shorter hospital stays makes more beds unnecessary, Friel said. Each bed will be in a private room, he added.

"It's probably going to be the safest building in the county," Friel said.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is contributing \$43 million to the project, Friel said. The hospital also sold \$10 million in tax-exempt bonds and is draw-



Work will begin today on Watsonville's new hospital

ing from its reserve account.

The hospital sustained about \$60 million in damage in the 1989 earthquake. FEMA ruled that the federal government should pay 75 percent of the total and the state Office of Emergency Services should pay the rest, Friel said.

But a state law, passed after the quake, capped what the state would pay for buildings owned by non-profit organizations at \$5 million, Friel said.

After the quake, state officials gave the hospital five years to either vacate the Green Valley Road site or bring the building up to code, Friel said. Later, that deadline was extended to 1998.

The concrete floor dropped several inches during the 1989 quake, Runestrand said, and the state's building requirements are stringent to ensure hospitals are in operating condition after a disaster.

Since the quake, the hospital has spent \$2.5 million on repairs, and

the building could be devoted to other uses once vacated.

Officials expect to have the new hospital ready by the spring of 1997, Friel said. Construction will take 22 months.

The 100 doctors and more than 700 medical workers all will move to the new site at once, Friel said. Officials are mapping out the details.

Workers said Wednesday they look forward to the move.

"It's going to be exciting," said Hank Weaver, 37, a biomedical engineer who began working in the hospital cafeteria when he was 16. "It's going to help us move into the future."

Keith is getting used to change since the Human Resources department has moved three times in the past five years as officials juggled space.

And Sutherland said the 175 active members of the all-volunteer hospital Service League, which employs the "pink ladies" and the "blue knights," are "absolutely thrilled to be part of the new hospital."

The ground-breaking ceremony will begin at 5:30 p.m. at the site at Nielson Road and Airport Boulevard.