

Hospitals - Watsonville Hospital

Watsonville Community Hospital: Then & Now

by Mary Bryant and
Laurence C. Grotheer

Publisher's Note: This article is the first in a three-part series looking at the history, health care services and future of Watsonville Community Hospital. The first part will report on the hospital's long-standing contributions to the community, the events surrounding last October's earthquake and the ultimate discovery of \$40 million in repairs to the building the hospital now faces. The second part of the series will review the damage assessments, available funding from federal and state sources and the possibilities for a new facility. The final article will discuss the role the hospital plays in the overall community as a health care provider and if a new facility is to be built, how choices may affect the entire county.

The first hospital for the community of Watsonville was opened in 1895. Since this time, not only has the city of Watsonville grown, but so has the entire South County Region.

Before there were the blossoming communities of Aptos, La Selva Beach and Freedom, there was Watsonville Community Hospital (WCH). This was a year after Thomas Edison demonstrated his kinetoscope for showing the first motion pictures and three years before Hawaii became a U.S. Territory.

A great deal has changed in the past 95 years, and so has the hospital.

And, possibly the hospital's biggest challenge lies ahead in deciding how to cope with \$40 million in repair costs as a result of damages from last year's earthquake.

After quietly suffering for the last ten months, WCH's Board of Directors and Administrators have many choices to make. And questions to answer. Should WCH be repaired while continuing to provide health care, or should they construct an entirely new and more modern facility? How will the repairs or new construction be paid for and by what agency? What is the best location to serve the south county, if a new hospital is opened? What would the existing building be used for in this case? How can they be even better prepared for another disaster?



WCH's Barbara Shingai

Many questions, and as of yet, there are not many clear answers.

In addition, these answers are due at a time when the south county is growing. The recent purchase of the AMI Community Hospital by Dominican Hospital of Santa Cruz means more people may look to WCH for services. And, to further confuse the issue, the economic woes of Santa Cruz County are jeopardizing the financial stability of local health care agencies. The very future of modern hospital costs is of concern.

WCH does have many allies to help with its problems. California's Office of Emergency Services (OES) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) have been there to help. There has been significant support from the community and from the hospital's staff.

History

WCH was founded in 1895 by Dr. P.K. Watters and opened in a five bedroom home at 3rd and Alexander in Watsonville. In 1897, the hospital outgrew the first site and moved nearby to 123 Third Street. By 1938, still growing with the community, WCH moved again to a building on Monte Vista Street, with a capacity for 39 patients.

The Monte Vista location almost doubled in size to 77 beds and an affluent neigh-

borhood grew around it by the time WCH was to move once again.

This time the Board of Directors decided to construct its own building. A fundraising drive was launched in 1965, with a goal of \$600,000 toward the estimated cost of \$3.2 million. It was hoped the balance would be paid from existing revenues, federal funds and the liquidation of the Monte Vista facility.

A landmark for Watsonville and the surrounding area, the hospital was finally opened in 1969, and was completed at an approximate cost of \$4.8 million.

Of the final cost, \$638,235 was raised by WCH and \$2,057,000 was contributed through federal funding—of the \$2.2 million the government originally promised.

With an initial capacity of 102 beds, the fourth generation of WCH was dedicated in the building at the corner of Airport Boulevard and Green Valley Road on Sunday, July 6, 1969. A crowd of a thousand witnessed the occasion.

The structure was larger than originally planned—the result of successful fundraising efforts by Edward Pfingst and others. With the additional funds, the Board of Directors had decided to 'shell' a fourth floor, i.e. complete the outside structure without finishing the interior.

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As reported by the Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, this meant the facility could eventually house 160 beds.

Non-Profit Status

While WCH was growing and moving, the nature of its corporate structure changed as well.

Originally incorporated in 1902 as a privately owned "for profit" business, it was reported that the shareholders began earning dividends in 1938. From this date to 1950, the profits not returned to maintenance and operations, totalled approximately 4% per year for the shareholders.

In 1950, the Board of Directors decided to apply for non-profit status. The original stock was retired at \$100 per share or \$80 per share less than the par value. The initial capitalization costs were paid through a bond sale, with the bonds to be repaid over 20 years.

The reorganization allowed WCH to become exempt from federal income tax, as well as county and city taxes. Perhaps most importantly, WCH could now qualify for the federal and state grants it needed for construction and improvement projects to keep pace with the growing needs of the south county. This also permitted gifts from individuals and organizations to become tax exempt and deductible.

So it was in 1969, when State Senator Donald Grunsky was the featured speaker at the dedication. WCH opened with 125 full-time employees, 25 part-time employees and a yearly payroll of \$624,000.

The Building

The site of today's WCH was purchased in 1965. The county's planning commission originally denied a permit to WCH because of conflicts with the airport's flight path. The Board of Supervisors overruled the commission in August, 1965, and the federal grant was received in December of the same year.

The successful bidder was the Carl N. Swenson Company of San Jose, with an initial low bid of \$3,465,000. The structure itself was designed by the San Francisco architectural firm of Stone, Maraccini and Patterson.

1980s Expansion

After the fourth floor was completed, WCH expanded again in 1982 with the addition of the Eiskamp Wing. This meant that the combined buildings and parking utilized most of the site's 15 acres.

The Eiskamp Building allowed WCH to expand to

125 beds, and provides community meeting rooms and administrative offices, among other things.

The Earthquake

On October 17, 1989, as a major earthquake centered in the Santa Cruz Mountains struck most of Northern California, officials from the Freedom Fire Department (FFD) were at WCH, meeting with hospital administrators to plan a disaster drill.

This twist of fate proved expeditious for the emergency response, since according to Barbara Shingai, a vice president at WCH, "Freedom Fire officials... immediately took a physical walk through, with a hospital official, through the entire building within minutes of the quake."

It was FFD's purpose, said Shingai, "to assess that in fact the building... was safe, [and] where we could occupy; where we needed to move out; things like that. It was about three or four hours later, into the night, that then after having done various checking of any gas leaks, oxygen, things like that, that it was determined it was fine to come back into the building... We [had] temporarily located on the front of the property in the parking lot..."

Though the disaster plan called for the evacuation decision to be made by WCH's CEO Paul Estess, it was actually Lisa Angell, RN and pre-hospital care coordinator, with a member of FFD, who made the decision. According to Angell in a recent interview, "I was making a walk around the building with the junior fire guy and we made the decision on ground here because of failed communications."

While it was not necessary to evacuate the majority of the building, Angell said, "In fact, just the fourth floor, [i.e.] the critical care area was evacuated. It was evacuated initially outside to the treatment and triage areas, and then patients were reabsorbed into the hospital... We consolidated patient care on the second and third floors, and kept the doctors up there all night long... because you need at that point... [to] maximize your time and resources."

In recognition of her efforts, Angell was awarded a special certificate of achievement from the U.S. Army Medical Department during May National Nurses Week activities at Silas B. Hayes Army Hospital of Fort Ord. Other WCH nurses were acknowledged for their work with an award from the California Nursing Association on May 23, 1990.

Initial Damages

Some of the damage was obvious. The windows of a glass lined interior walkway connecting the Eiskamp Wing and the main hospital shattered. Other damage, according to WCH's Shingai, was discovered at a modular unit that sank several feet into the ground. Parts of the hospital floor also fell in a bit, pulling away from walls and leaving spaces under doors. Metal framing buckled, and equipment and files were thrown around. There was also damage to the hospital's ventilation system.

The cost of repairs was initially estimated to be \$2 million. WCH began working with FEMA and OES to secure funding and fix the damage.

More Damage Discovered

In the midst of planning for and completing the early repairs, things started to smell bad for WCH, literally. According to CEO Estess, in addition to a half-million dollars worth of heating and ventilation ducts to fix and the modular building to repair, the hospital staff began to notice odors coming up through the floor drains. Estess remembered that, "the odors were followed a few weeks later by the emergence of gnats. We realized we probably had some broken sewer lines under the floor. The investigation kind of went on from there."

Estess continued: "We started core drilling holes in the floor and discovered the void [between the floor slab and the ground that had shifted and settled as a result of the 'quake]. Then they dug out on the exterior of the building and unleashed this giant accumulation of material that had leached out of our sewer pipes, that had just been accumulating under the building. That's gone now."

"Then we did a video inspection of the sewer pipes down there and [found] we had fairly extensive breakage of the sewer pipes."

That, coupled with the void, has been essentially the central problem that we're still stuck with today."

Work is already underway to complete interior repairs associated with the additional damage, and waste from the second, third, and fourth floors has been rerouted. Estess said, "to repair the existing structure we're looking at a number in the range of \$40 million."

The escalated cost has caused WCH to pause and think about building a new facility. Estess thinks a new building might be a better

deal. "Between those two options, it's the obvious choice," he said.

A possible site for relocation is WCH-owned land in Aptos, but Estess said it, "really isn't enough, frankly, to do a full hospital program. We had that site programmed for a housing development, with some medical/office facilities there. Some 40,000 square feet of medical/office. That's still our plan," he said.

Still At Work

As contractors continue their work on the hospital, administrators continue their negotiations with state and federal agencies. Architects

continue to make their plans, and its still business as usual at WCH.

According to nurse Angell, "We're back to business as usual. We're working real hard to keep it normal. It's kind of interesting. One thing about the hospital, and the administration, and the people who are working here, [is that] they are working incredibly hard... in the face of tremendous odds financially, and the whole big thing that's happened... and they're working really hard to keep up the quality of health care that this community is privileged to have." □