

FEMA affirms

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Seagate best hospital site

Agency says airport poses minimal risk

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A draft environmental assessment that looks at five sites for the new Watsonville Community Hospital building has determined that the Seagate site is the best choice.

The report was prepared for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which has agreed to pay for a portion of the cost of replacing its current earthquake-damaged building. The report was prepared by LSA Associates, a Point Richmond-based consultant, and was carried out under FEMA and the National Environmental Policy Act requirements.

The hospital and Seagate recently announced purchase of the property on Airport Boulevard and Nielson Way. A pilots' group, the Coalition for Responsible Airport Management and Planning, has campaigned against the hospital building on the site, which is located across the street from the municipal airport. The pilots have argued that the hospital shouldn't be built near the airport because of potential safety and noise problems.

But the FEMA report dismissed the safety concerns.

"Due to the fact that no major

aircraft accidents have occurred at the airport over the past 10 years, the aircraft accident probability for the proposed hospital building at the Seagate site is estimated to be less than one percent," the report said. "Under a worse-case scenario, less than one in 100 accidents would be expected to involve the hospital.

"Therefore the risk potential for the proposed hospital is judged to be within the range of acceptability."

In determining the safety risk, the FEMA assessment appears to have relied solely on information that appeared in a report commissioned by Watsonville Community Hospital. The report, written by P&D Aviation, is referred to several times in the FEMA assessment, and is included in the appendix and bibliography. Other than the Watsonville Municipal Airport Master Plan, no other material obviously related to aircraft safety is included in the bibliography.

Due to the holiday, FEMA, Watsonville Community Hospital and LSA Associates could not be reached for comment.

Bill Dickerson, the director of

stop the runaway locomotive.

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CRAMP, had not yet received a copy of the assessment. He said he didn't want to comment on its findings until he'd had a chance to thoroughly examine it.

But he did say that if he didn't think the assessment was adequate, he would take the matter to the Federal Aviation Administration and other airport agencies.

"I already told them if I didn't think they did a good job on it, I'd go straight to Washington on this," he said.

Dickerson questioned why FEMA would do an environmental assessment after having already committed funds to the hospital to purchase the Seagate site.

"Someone at FEMA told them it was a done deal," he said. How, he asked, can they do an objective and fair report when they've already given the go-ahead on the land purchase? "It's not right."

The report also dismisses noise problems, saying that "through typical hospital building design," noise inside the building would be reduced to accepted levels. The noise might pose a problem in a courtyard and in an outside playground at the day-care center, the report said. It also said the day-care center would be able to mitigate noise inside its building by keeping windows and doors closed and using a ventilation system instead for fresh air.

"In summary," the report said,

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"based on the modelled noise levels, the noise environment at the Seagate site would appear to be conditionally suitable for hospital development both now and in the future."

The report said possible disturbance of wildlife habitats caused by building on the Seagate site could be avoided by realigning an access road. It also cited on-site flooding and possible erosion of a steep bank to a gully as possible hazards, but said "all of the impacts could be mitigated to a less than significant level of impact."

The other sites considered by the report were the so-called Edwards site, on the far west side of Watsonville; the Console site, which is bounded by Ramsay Park, Highway 1, Harkins Slough and Main Street; the Landmark site, east of Highway 1 and south of Highway 152; and the Holohan site, directly southeast of the current hospital building. The report also looked at the alternative of taking no action.

FEMA is taking comments from the public on its draft report through March 18. Copies of the report are available at the Watsonville Public Library, 310 Union St., Watsonville, and the Santa Cruz Public Library, 224 Church St., Santa Cruz.

Written comments on the report should be sent to Sandro Amaglio, Regional Environmental Officer, Presidio of San Francisco, Building 105, San Francisco 94129, Attention: WCH DEA Public Comment.