

Local

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Hospitals - Dominican Hospital Negotiations postpone nurses' strike notice

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SANTA CRUZ — Progress on pay and benefits in negotiations between Dominican Hospital and its nurses has staved off a strike notice, at least temporarily.

Hospital officials and nurses met with a federal mediator for the first time Thursday, reaching accord on back pay and additional health benefits.

But union representation remains the key stumbling block, negotiators agreed.

"Essentially, the hospital is saying it's going to make us strike if we want agency shop," said Tom Landig, a member of the negotiating team.

Thursday was the first day a 10-strike notice could have been issued by nurses, who voted overwhelmingly last week to authorize a walkout.

Landig said the union will hold off as long as progress is being made.

Negotiators have agreed to meet with the mediator again Tuesday.

Both sides already have agreed to a 13-percent pay increase, and to additional pay for nurses who have night shifts or extra duties.

The raise was a compromise struck between both sides, to bring Dominican nurses' wages in line with those of nurses at Watsonville Hospital, who already have a union shop.

As it now stands, the salary range at Dominican is from \$18.82 to \$23.41 an hour.

Thursday, negotiators agreed to up to

\$2,900 in retroactive pay for nurses, who have been working for the last year without a contract. Landig said those lump sums are to be paid June 3.

But negotiators are still wrangling over pension plans, the length of a new contract and agency shop.

Agency shop would require nurses who do not join the union to pay the equivalent to dues — about \$400 to \$500 a year — to a non-profit agency.

Hospital officials object.

"We don't want to be in the position of

having to fire nurses who don't want to do that," said Penny Jacobi, Dominican's public relations director.

Even if agreements are reached on the other issues, Landig said, the nurses are willing to strike for agency shop.

If the strike notice is issued, another vote will be called before nurses walk off their jobs.

In preparation for a strike, the hospital has built new security fences, hired a security firm and is making arrangements to hire replacement staff.