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County reveals plan for five-story clinic at Medical Center

By Charles Levin and Kathleen Wilson, clevin@VenturaCountyStar.com kwilson@VenturaCountyStar.com May 14, 2005



Courtesy photo

An artist's rendering shows what the proposed \$25 million, five-story Medical Center clinic building would look like.

County leaders announced plans Friday to build a five-story clinic at Ventura County Medical Center, reviving a piece of a 1995 proposal opposed by nearby Community Memorial Hospital and rejected by voters.

The 73,000-square-foot facility in Ventura would cost \$25 million and house offices and clinics to provide a host of services, including family care, pediatrics, women's health and oncology, VCMC Administrator Michael Powers said in a meeting with The Star's editorial board. It would be a separate building constructed on the Hillmont Avenue side of the hospital campus.

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Building a clinic is critical to the county's mission of providing a safety net for growing numbers of poor or uninsured patients, officials said. The county now provides such services in trailers and leased office spaces and at VCMC, but those facilities are cramped and inadequate, Powers said.

Rival hospital not threatened

Gary Wilde, Community Memorial's CEO, said Friday he has no objections as long as the building serves indigent patients already using the county's outpatient clinics. Wilde said CMH would oppose any attempt to go after the private market with a publicly funded medical building.

"If the plan had been to add specialists and try to vie for private patients in competition with

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private physicians, that's where we would naturally put up a flag, because they would have an unfair advantage," Wilde said.

Phil Drescher, a board member at Community Memorial, said he recently toured the county facilities that Powers and others would like to replace. He declined to give his impressions but said the CMH board would evaluate the proposal.

"We're taking a close look at it," he said.

The county would pay for the facility over 15 years through a combination of state grants, clinic revenues and about \$500,000 a year in savings from current lease agreements, said Pierre Durand, director of the county's Health Care Agency. "We're still refining the numbers," Durand said.

The plan will go to the county Board of Supervisors in a few weeks, County Executive Officer Johnny Johnston said. The facility could be completed within four years of approval, Powers said.

Similar plan failed a decade ago

Ventura County proposed a similar clinic building in 1995 as part of a larger \$51 million expansion and renovation. Community Memorial attacked the overall expansion as a ploy to take away private patients and filed a lawsuit alleging unfair competition -- a case it lost in court.

CMH then took the fight to the ballot box in 1996 through Measure X, a referendum to prevent county supervisors from borrowing state money for the expansion. Community Memorial

launched a \$1.6 million campaign, and 63 percent of voters rejected the county project.

In 2000, Community Memorial spent \$2.7 million on a failed ballot initiative to divert the county's share of tobacco lawsuit settlement money to private hospitals. The measure was defeated by a 2-1 margin at the polls.

In March 2001, both sides ended the feud with an agreement that allowed the county to build a kitchen and laboratory at VCMC. In exchange, CMH agreed not to sue over that expansion. Language in that agreement also allows the county to proceed with a new clinic to replace existing facilities and services, Supervisor Steve Bennett said.

Some of the services in the new clinic would be specialized but targeted at preventive medicine and treatment of poor or uninsured patients, who otherwise would seek help in the emergency room at three times the cost, Powers said.

Johnston said the county's revival of the clinic plan had nothing to do with a change in CMH administration. Former CMH Administrator Michael Bakst strongly opposed the 1996 proposed expansion but left the job in 2003 after a legal battle with CMH medical staff.

Several reasons for timing

The county is resurrecting the plan now because state funding might not be available for long, the project is 10 years overdue, and other VCMC projects have now been completed, such as a backup generator, cafeteria and laboratory, Johnston said.

Durand said the new building would consolidate several clinics and streamline services to meet the needs of a growing population and complex health insurance system. The county has recorded about 330,000 visits to its clinic system so far this fiscal year, a 103 percent increase from 1986 to 1987, according to Powers and public records.

Bennett said there would be some risk to the county's general fund if its financial assumptions don't work out. "But it's well worth it," he said.

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