CONTRA COSTA TIMES

\$12 million allocated to replace Richmond Health Center

By Tom Lochner Contra Costa Times

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A new health center for West Contra Costa County, to be built on the campus of Doctors Medical Center, San Pablo, took a big step closer toward reality Wednesday with a \$12 million infusion of federal economic stimulus funds.

The center will replace the venerable but obsolete county-run Richmond Health Center, which has logged more than 1 million patient visits since it opened in 1967, according to health officials.

"We've tried for years to provide high quality care in an aging, dysfunctional building in a Contra Costa community with some of the highest health needs," said Dr. William Walker, the county's health services director. "We'll finally be able to realize our dream by building a state of art building to match the high quality of care we've always delivered."

The Richmond Health Center, one of eight run by Contra Costa County, provides primary and specialty care, well-baby visits, immunizations and other critical services. The center, at 38th Street and Bissel Avenue in Richmond, has 50,000 usable square feet, which is described as inadequate; and elevators, air conditioning and other utilities that break down frequently, according to the office of U.S. Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, which, along with the office of Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia, announced Wednesday's award.

Some Richmond residents vocally opposed a move to San Pablo, arguing at community meetings over the last two years that the current location is convenient and well-served by mass transit. Opposition subsided somewhat after officials made the case that the new center would be centrally located near the Richmond city line and be accessible by public transit, and that it would be able to serve far more people than the approximately 10,000 who receive health care annually at the current center.

The award to Contra Costa County is one of 85 construction and renovation grants to community health centers and networks nationwide and one of 11 in California in a \$508.5 million cycle of funding announced by President Barack Obama at the White House, and part of the greater \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act he signed earlier this year.

The grants are supposed to help the health centers institute electronic record-keeping as well as promote jobs and provide health care to more than a half-million additional people in underserved communities, according to the White House.

(more)

SUPERVISOR GIOIA 2-2-2-2-2-2

"This is the culmination of a partnership between the county and the community," said Gioia, who attended the midday award ceremony in Washington. "The community has wanted this and supported the health department's replacement efforts for years. This is an incredible opportunity to link the Richmond Health Center and Doctors Medical Center -- two public health systems -- to give the community the health services they need and deserve, and to create badly needed jobs."

Elsewhere in the Bay Area, the Solano County Health and Social Services Department will receive almost \$2.2 million; Petaluma Health Center Inc. in Petaluma, \$8.9 million; Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital System in San Jose, \$2.64 million; and San Mateo County Health Services Agency, \$1.77 million. The maximum amount of the grants awarded Wednesday was \$12 million.

Miller, in a news release, said: "This is a huge shot in the arm for our communities as they work to provide much needed health care services."

He called the move to the San Pablo hospital campus "a win for our entire community."

"Patients will have access to comprehensive services at the hospital and health center, medical staff will be able to share resources and the community will have better access to the facility," Miller said. "Community health centers, like this one, are key to developing a national plan for comprehensive health care."

Under the guidelines of the awards, the new center must open within two years, said Gioia, who also is the board chairman of the Doctors Medical Center Management Authority, a joint powers agency of the West Contra Costa Healthcare District, which owns the hospital, and Contra Costa County.

Officials hope to have a timeline and a complete financing package in place in January, he said.

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