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West County health clinic set for former trailer park site

By Tom Lochner Contra Costa Times

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Contra Costa County and San Pablo officials exchanged congratulations this week over a plan for a West County Health Center at a former mobile home park, hailing it as a "win-win-win" — for the county, the city and the community.

The proposed clinic, which was awarded \$12 million in federal economic stimulus money in December, was supposed to go on the Doctors Medical Center San Pablo campus. However, no one could figure out where to fit it on the crowded grounds of the hospital, which already faces a parking shortage.

The new clinic will replace the Richmond Health Center, which opened in 1967 and is in disrepair and functionally obsolete, according to health officials. The Richmond clinic, one of eight county health centers, logs 80,000 patient visits annually, half of them for primary care, the other half for specialty care, according to Dr. William Walker, the county's health services director.

"This brings a state-of-the-art health center back to West County," said county Supervisor John Gioia, board chairman of the Doctors Medical Center Management Authority, the joint powers agency of the county and the West Contra Costa Healthcare District, which owns the hospital.

The new clinic will include 53,000 square feet on two floors with an adjacent 320-space parking garage. The clinic's design maximizes natural light, and includes other "sustainability" features, officials said. The city proposes to sell a 2.5-acre portion of the Circle S Mobile Home Park site to the county for \$3.6 million for the new clinic.

The entire Circle S Project site totals about 18 acres on the west side of San Pablo Avenue between Vale Road and Church Lane, including the former Circle S and Alvarado Mobile Home parks, a Salvation Army store and a former lumber yard.

Part of the idea to situate the county clinic on the hospital campus, at 2000 Vale Road, was to link two public health systems.

The clinic's new location is the southernmost portion of the Circle S site, nearest to Vale Road. It is separated from the hospital by Brookside Condominiums. That still would put the clinic "close enough to walk and create the medical hub 'synergy' envisioned as part of the planning," Gioia's chief of staff, Terrance Cheung, wrote in an e-mail.

The total cost of the clinic is expected to be \$45 million to \$50 million, with the balance coming from federal Recovery Zone Bonds, according to a San Pablo staff report. Construction could begin early next year and be completed by spring 2012.

County and city officials unveiled the clinic plan and design Tuesday at a community meeting in Maple Hall that was followed by a study session in the City Council chamber, where other West County officials and two representatives of building trades unions offered another round of praise. West Contra Costa Unified School District board member Antonio Medrano lauded the "incredible vision of collaboration."

The plan also got the "wholehearted support" of San Pablo resident Xavier Viramontes, a leader in the recent fight against a move to renew the San Pablo Redevelopment Agency's lapsed powers of eminent domain. In May, the City Council, bending to a vocal and organized opposition, dropped the idea, although it could try again in the future.

The agency used eminent domain to acquire the Alvarado and Circle S parks from their former owners, Edward Biggs and Robert Johanson. The parties ended up settling for \$3.7 million and \$17 million, respectively. Adding the smaller parcels that compose the greater Circle S site, the agency paid a total of \$24.2 million. The agency additionally paid \$8.3 million in relocation costs spread among the roughly 250 mobile home households in the two parks. Adding legal and other costs, the agency spent a total of \$33.9 million on the site as of late December.

Last year, the redevelopment agency unveiled conceptual images for an upscale, mixed-use development for the Circle S site tentatively dubbed "The District." The new clinic would serve as a "catalyst" for The District by bringing in foot traffic, San Pablo assistant city manager Kelsey Worthy said.