

Voters to decide in November on tax for San Pablo hospital

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West Contra Costa voters will decide in the fall whether to approve another tax and keep a struggling San Pablo hospital afloat.

This week, the five-member West Contra Costa Healthcare District Board of Directors unanimously voted to call for a special, all-mail ballot election Nov. 15, and place a parcel tax on the ballot.

"It is hard to close the financial gap without the revenue from this tax," said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, who represents West Contra Costa and chairs an 11-member governing body that advises the board of directors. Closure "will affect all residents in West County."

If passed, the measure would go into effect July 1, 2012, and cost single-family residents \$47 per year. Owners of small multiunit residential properties would pay \$94 per parcel, while small commercial and industrial parcel owners would pay \$282. Medium commercial and industrial property owners would pay \$470, while owners of large commercial and industrial parcels would owe \$940.

The tax would raise \$5.1 million per year for the hospital, which serves residents from El Cerrito in the south to Crockett in the north, and would pay to keep the only full-service emergency room in West Contra Costa. The measure would also pay for services like intensive care, treatment for heart attacks, women's health, elderly care and cancer treatment. The tax would expire if the hospital closed.

Hospital administrators said the tax is crucial to keeping Doctors Medical Center open. The facility is facing an \$18 million annual deficit; while the tax would only cover part of that shortfall, officials said they will also find ways to collaborate with other organizations to reduce costs, refinance debt and improve efficiency at the hospital.

"The community wants to know we're doing other things and not just relying on the parcel tax," said Irma Anderson, chair of the board of directors.

Local property owners are already paying a \$52 annual tax for Doctors Medical Center that voters overwhelmingly supported in 2004. The hospital declared bankruptcy in 2006; it has stayed afloat thanks to a loan from Contra Costa County and financial support from Kaiser Permanente and John

Muir Health.

Gioia said Doctors "continues to have a structural deficit because it's a stand-alone public hospital in a community that has a very challenged payer mix."

That translates to 10 percent of the hospital's patients being uninsured, while another 10 percent have commercial insurance. The rest are covered by Medi-Cal and Medicare, which Gioia says have reimbursement rates lower than the cost of care.

If the measure does not pass, Gioia said the hospital would likely close next year. That would mean a heavier load on Kaiser Richmond, Alta Bates in Berkeley, Children's Hospital Oakland and the Contra Costa Regional Medical Center in Martinez. For patients, it would mean longer wait times at emergency rooms, and essential services being farther away.