

# Vote 'yes' on Measure J to keep Doctors Medical Center open

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Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo, Calif. (Staff archives)



West Contra Costa voters are being told they must approve yet another property tax increase or the emergency room serving some of the most needy patients in the East Bay will shut down. Their decision will affect health care from Richmond and Martinez to Walnut Creek, Berkeley and Oakland.

What voters aren't being told is that, with the West Contra Costa Healthcare District hanging on a financial edge, it already irresponsibly issued long-term bonds to pay past short-term expenses -- and plans to do so again next year to raise operating cash. They're also not being told that if two lucrative hospitals in the region stepped up, the new tax would not be necessary.

Nevertheless, we're willing to give district leaders and hospitals in the region one more chance -- but only one more. We urge voters to support Measure J, the \$47-per-house tax increase that would raise \$5.1 million annually to keep the district's only hospital, Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo, afloat. That's on top of a similar \$52-a-year tax voters approved in 2004.

At the same time, we have a strong message for hospital leaders not only in West Contra Costa but throughout the region: Get it together. You must act quickly to develop and implement a realistic plan. Otherwise, cash-flow projections show, the next crisis will probably hit by summer of 2014.

Closing West Contra Costa's busiest emergency room would be devastating, placing significantly greater demands on other East Bay hospitals that would have to absorb an annual 41,000 visits, a majority by patients with no insurance or who are on Medi-Cal.

It's in everyone's financial interest to solve this. That will mean contributions from other hospitals. At the same time, district officials must radically downsize Doctors to provide essential emergency services in a financially sustainable way.

The district has struggled for decades, at one point entering bankruptcy, at another turning Doctors, formerly known as Brookside Hospital, over to a private company, and most recently obtaining county loans to avoid insolvency. With major financial help from Kaiser and some assistance from John Muir Health, the district limped along until the state unexpectedly cut funding this year.

Kaiser's aid will run out at the end of the year. John Muir already stopped its contribution. Sutter's Alta Bates Summit Medical Center has been no help. All three have a financial stake in this.

Kaiser, with its Richmond hospital closest, recognizes this and has been generous. John Muir and Sutter are another story. Despite their nonprofit status, they have not provided as much charity care as one would expect from major institutions enjoying lucrative tax breaks.

While we can shame those two hospital systems for turning their backs, that won't keep Doctors open. Only responsible financial planning will do that.

Ballots must be mailed back in time to reach the county elections office by Nov. 15. Vote yes.