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Voters pass parcel tax for Doctors Medical Center

By: <u>Hasan Dudar</u> | November 16, 2011 - 11:35 am

Voters in West Contra Costa County passed a ballot measure Tuesday that Doctors Medical Center administrators said will keep the struggling hospital from closing.

Measure J, which won with nearly 74 percent of voters casting "yes" ballots, will allow the county to put in place a \$47 parcel tax increase per household in West County, bringing the hospital about \$5 million in tax revenue that will help it close an anticipated \$18 million budget gap.

The Yes on J campaign met in the conference room of a Point Richmond office building Tuesday evening as the group anxiously awaited the results they had expected to be phoned in at five past eight.



County Supervisor John Gioia writes the ballot results for Measure J on a board as county election officials phone in the results. Measure J will help raise about \$5 million in revenue through a parcel tax for Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo, which will help the hospital avoid closure. (Photo by Hasan Dudar)

At 8:01, County Supervisor John Gioia received a call on his cell phone, grabbed a red dry erase marker, and wrote "23,923 Yes" on one side of the board and "8,546 No" on the other. As the dozen community members and hospital staff in attendance watched, Gioia circled the number "73.68" on the board, indicating the measure had earned well above the two-thirds majority it needed to pass.

When they saw they topped the threshold needed to pass the measure, supporters and hospital staff congratulated and high-fived each other. Campaign Manager John Whitehurst called the vote a mandate from voters.

Gioia overheard the comment, and jumped in the conversation:

"It is a mandate. It's a mandate to continue our work to go out and save this hospital," Gioia said.

The tax will join a \$52-per-year parcel tax passed in 2004, when Tenet Healthcare Corp., a for-profit company that bought the hospital in the late 1990s, sold the hospital to the West Contra Costa Healthcare District.

Doctors Interim CEO Dawn Gideon said revenue from the tax will not be collected until next winter, and the hospital will begin issuing certificates of participation, similar to bonds, soon to raise funding for operations.

Gideon said she was relieved when she heard the news, but she was quick to acknowledge the important role the community and voters had in the process.

"The irony is not lost on me, that we provide care for a lot of people that are poor...and they can't afford to pay for a parcel tax increase," she said.

Eric Zell, the Vice Chair of the WCCHD said the hospital could not have stayed open without the parcel tax, and said the campaign had to make clear to the voters that they wouldn't be taxed without reason.

Parcel Tax for Doctors Medical Center 2-2-2-2

"That's what the voters have said to us: We need this. We want it to stay."

Doctors is one of two public hospitals in the county and, with 24 emergency stations, the largest emergency department in the West County, an area with a population of about 250,000. That had administrators and health care providers worried about a possible health care crisis.

The closest emergency department is at the Kaiser Richmond Medical Center, which Kaiser officials confirmed has 15 beds. Gioia said that would't be enough to accommodate the expected surge in admittances if Doctors were to close. Doctors' emergency department sees over 40,000 patients annually on average, Gideon said.

Emergency Department physician Seth Thomas said he was overjoyed when he heard the news, because losing the hospital would have been a "tremendous blow" to the community.

"The community supports us," he said. "That's what that means to me."

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