

Richmond to make pitch to state for health exchange call center

By Robert Rogers

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RICHMOND -- Frustrated with apparent stalemate at the county, city leaders on Tuesday vowed to initiate direct talks with the state to secure a new health exchange call center, one of three centers statewide to help residents navigate the Affordable Care Act.

Stalled negotiations between Contra Costa County and labor groups led county supervisors on Tuesday to table a measure to select either Concord or Richmond as the site of the new center, which would provide more than 200 jobs.

"The county may have given up," Richmond Councilman Jael Myrick said. "That doesn't mean that Richmond must give up entirely."

The City Council voted unanimously Tuesday, just hours after the Board of Supervisors tabled the item, to direct staff to initiate talks with the state to secure the funds for the site.

City Manager Bill Lindsay said the city is prepared to partner with the property owner of the proposed site, Richard Poe, to reach a contract with the state independent of the county.

Myrick was most outspoken in his enthusiasm for the new strategy.

"I know for a fact that staff at the state was more impressed with the Richmond site" than the Concord site, Myrick said. "(We can) take the county out as the middle man."

The county's plan faltered Tuesday when it was unable to reach a deal with its labor unions, which wanted more lucrative health insurance benefits and more liberal work rules in exchange for their signoff on the deal.

Last month, the state selected the county as a site for one of three call centers aimed at supporting eligibility and enrollment efforts of state-level Affordable Care Act programs as part of the 2010 federal health care law.

According to a staff report released last week, the cost to occupy the proposed site at 1450

Marina Way South in Richmond would be \$3.4 million, and the cost at the Concord site, 2500 Bates Ave., would be \$4.25 million.

Late Tuesday, Service Employees International Union Local 1021 asked the county to restart negotiations and potentially revive the deal, County Administrator David Twa confirmed.

SEIU Local 1021, which would represent 180 of the center's 214 new employees, wanted a percentage split on health insurance premiums between the county and the employee.

Supervisors capped county contributions at 2011 levels for most of its nearly 9,000 employees, and they said reverting to the old formula would drive up costs.

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 512 is also at odds with Contra Costa on the call center.

It wanted the county to pay six of the 14 employees under its union umbrella a 12.75 percent differential in "order to make the job attractive to experienced county employees who would be reassigned to the center," said Local 512 representative Richard Cabral.

Richmond leaders signaled they were eager to step into the breach.

"I've spoken with (County Supervisor John) Gioia, and he is supportive of the cities stepping in," Myrick said. "We don't have the same situation with labor costs."

Gioia said Wednesday the unions' expectations would have exceeded the costs allocated by the state.

"I support Richmond's efforts to secure the call center," Gioia said. "The best thing at this point would be for the state to run the call center in Richmond."

Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin said she was "optimistic" that Richmond would still get the sought-after site.

"Perhaps not going through the county is the better scenario at this point," she said.

Councilman Nat Bates agreed, saying despite its advantages in costs, location and facilities over the Concord site, Richmond was destined to get short shrift if the decision were made by the county.

"We have five Board (of Supervisors) members, and only one is committed to West County," Bates said. "That's what's going on."

Poe said he was ready to work with city staff and approach the state to seek the contract immediately.

"Richmond is the best site by far, and the state knows that," Poe said. "We're ready to go."

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