

County, UCSF explore partnership with Doctors Medical Center

By Robert Rogers

Contra Costa Times POSTED: 08/20/2013 03:35:10 PM PDT

SAN PABLO -- County officials are exploring a potential partnership between Doctors Medical Center and UC San Francisco Medical Center in an effort to ensure the long-term viability of the chronically underfunded county hospital.

Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia confirmed that preliminary discussions have been held between county health staff and UCSF officials in recent months.

"The goal is to make (DMC) financially sustainable, and the best way to do that is to have a partnership with a larger health care system," Gioia said. "(A partnership with UCSF) is an exciting opportunity to explore."

Doctors Medical Center opened in 1954. It employs about 1,000 people and handles 40,000 emergency-room visits per year. The cash-strapped hospital is a safety net for the poor and mostly serves Medi-Cal recipients.

The hospital filed for bankruptcy in 2006 and was saved in 2011 by a special election ballot measure assessing new parcel taxes within the West Contra Costa County Health Care District. In July, the county Board of Supervisors agreed to transfer \$9 million to the hospital for day-to-day operations, money that will be paid back via the parcel tax, Gioia said.

The eight-story hospital faces steep hurdles in the future as well. State mandates require the facility be retrofitted to meet earthquake standards by 2020 or moved into a newer facility, Remy Goldsmith, a hospital spokeswoman, said. No estimates are available, Goldsmith said, but either option would cost millions.

Goldsmith said the hospital would welcome a partnership with UCSF.

"We're hoping there is a link to Doctors Medical Center in the discussions" between county and UCSF officials, she said.

Jay Harris, UCSF Medical Center's chief strategy and business development officer, said via email that UCSF is "not in direct discussions" with Doctors Medical Center, but does "continue to talk with all local health care delivery organizations and have visited with the Contra Costa County Health System with which Doctors is affiliated."

"UCSF is actively building a regional system of care," Harris wrote. " ... this includes the East Bay where we aim to align with community providers in order to better serve local needs through a combined expertise in health care."

UCSF is reportedly in discussions about a partnership with Children's Hospital & Research Center in Oakland.

In contrast to the strained-budgets at DMC, UCSF Medical Center is consistently ranked among the world's best hospitals and has a long history of cutting-edge research and medical breakthroughs.

Gioia said integrating the hospital into a larger health care system is the logical approach, especially since the passage of the federal Affordable Care Act.

"Stand-alone hospitals are challenged to succeed," Gioia said. "We're seeing a national shift in health care deliver models toward greater affiliations between health groups, hospitals and systems."

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