

Doctors turns to public for input on business plan

- Officials hope to pull hospital out of bankruptcy and onto recovery

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By Tom Lochner

Doctors Medical Center San Pablo will make its case to the public Wednesday for a business plan it hopes will steer the hospital out of bankruptcy and toward long-term survival. But leaders say the hospital faces some harsh realities with no immediate end in sight, notably a high number of emergency room patients who are indigent and without insurance.

The business plan, developed in the past several months by a team of consultants headed by interim CEO Tim Weis, envisions a 100-bed hospital with 24 emergency beds. The hospital currently is licensed for just fewer than 250 beds, but the daily patient census has hovered recently in the 80s and some days even in the 90s; the total includes a handful of patients from the state Department of Corrections who are treated on the hospital's top floor.

Weis -- speaking to the Pinole City Council recently during his rounds before the councils in all five West Contra Costa cities -- said the area desperately needs Doctors' emergency room, which is the only ER in West County besides a smaller one at Kaiser Medical Center in Richmond.

But the hospital must make decisions soon on what to do about two of its core programs: the cancer center and cardiac care.

The cancer center is well-known and highly regarded but has been investment-starved in recent years and needs about \$4.3 million to catch up to the state of the art, Weis said. For cardiac care, the decision needs to be made whether to have a full-service program including cardiac surgery or to farm the latter out to other hospitals. Cardiac surgery is currently suspended.

A draft business plan that is available online estimates that once it is implemented, there still will be a long-term funding requirement of about \$4 million to \$6 million a year, part of which could be made up by a parcel tax increase. Homeowners currently pay \$52 a year; that tax was approved by voters in 2004.

The plan also identifies short-term funding requirements of \$20 million in \$5 million increments during the next 14 months.

The hospital has capital needs of about \$25 million in the next 3 1/2 years, Weis told the Pinole council.

The timetable for implementing the business plan would be July, Weis said.

"We do not have a lot of time to debate and belabor," he said. "Time is of the essence."

"This is a clear and achievable business plan for this hospital," said Gisela Hernandez, director of community and government affairs for Doctors. The hospital has made great strides in the

past few months improving billing and collections and implementing cost savings and other efficiencies, she said.

Wednesday's forum, which Hernandez likened to "a conversation with the community about the future of the hospital," will be co-sponsored by Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, who is chairman of the Doctors Medical Center Management Authority board, and Dr. Desmond Carson, an emergency physician at the hospital who is board chairman of the West Contra Costa Healthcare District, which owns the hospital.

Carson also is on the board of the Management Authority, which is a joint powers agency of the county and the health care district.

Sandra Falk, an official of Public Employees Union Local 1, which represents clerical and lab workers at the hospital, said community support is all-important to any survival plan.

"Local 1 has talked to our members about taking the glass-half-full approach, which means that we may not have every service that we would like but that we have the ones that are most crucial for the community," Falk said.

She said she hopes local businesses will help buy a linear accelerator and other needed equipment.

"Then it becomes a full community effort," she said.