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Contra Costa County to investigate high public hospital costs

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen
Contra Costa Times
Posted: 01/18/2011 04:35:17 PM PST
Updated: 01/19/2011 07:22:21 AM PST

MARTINEZ -- Contra Costa County will pay a consultant to help determine why its public hospital costs have shot up 89 percent over the past eight years and recommend how to reduce the taxpayer subsidy.

The board of supervisors on Tuesday authorized a \$390,000 contract with Health Management Services for a "sustainability study," which essentially will answer the question of whether and how the county can continue to afford its publicly owned and operated hospital.

The Contra Costa Regional Medical Center in Martinez, and associated county medical facilities, have been a budget flash point for years, particularly among public safety advocates who say that health services drain money needed to pay sheriffs and house criminals.

At the time the county approved the hospital's construction, critics wanted a privately operated hospital with tightly controlled taxpayer subsidy.

Advocates of public ownership and operation successfully argued that for-profit business and indigent care were a mismatch. They also vigorously disputed the premise that publicly funded health care is optional.

The county's ongoing fiscal woes have pushed that dispute back into the public arena.

County Administrator David Twa, who is cutting another \$50 million from the budget for the next fiscal year, said the county's share of the hospital costs have substantially outpaced inflation and population growth, reaching \$60 million in 2010.

In 2001,

the subsidy was 3.08 percent of the county's general fund. That figure grew to 4.61 percent in 2008.

The board voted unanimously in favor of the study, which Twa had sought for more than a year, but the supervisors hold deeply divergent views on health care.

Supervisor Mary Nejedly Piepho of Discovery Bay, a more conservative member who has urged Twa to avoid further public safety cuts, embraced the contract.

"This effort is intended to help get us a sustainable model in our county's health care delivery system, which we don't have today," she said. "Taking \$40 million to \$50 million a year out of the general fund each year is unsustainable."

Supervisor John Gioia, of Richmond, who leads a joint powers authority set up to help with the management of Doctors Medical Center in San

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Pablo, cautioned his colleagues against placing too much confidence in a consultant.

"The big concern I have, the way the contract is worded, is it sets up high expectations that all the answers we are looking for will be in this report. ... It's flat-out wrong for a for-profit consultant to make policy recommendations. That's our purview," he said.

Dr. William Walker, the county's hospital and Health Services Department director, agreed with Gioia's assessment but said that an outside analysis could prove useful.

Health care remains a highly complex and fast-moving policy arena involving federal, state and local dollars, he said.

As a result of federal health care reform, the county will receive money for the thousands of additional residents

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who will be eligible for insurance under the new rules.

In addition, Contra Costa also is building a new health center in San Pablo, expanding its Antioch and Concord centers and converting to an electronic medical record system as required by law.

"Suffice to say, we have a lot of balls in the air," Walker said.

Health Management Associates, the consulting firm, must deliver its final report by May 31. The county will use reserves to pay for the work.

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