

All About Marin: Huffman seeks to change Proposition 13

Staff Report

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.....For years, the Marin Board of Supervisors has decided that diving into the bitter power struggle over Marin General Hospital would be politically unhealthy.

Besides steering clear of a nasty political feud, county officials didn't want to inherit the controversy or the budgetary responsibility.

With the uncertainties swirling around the future of MGH, supervisors are prepared to hire a consultant, the Abaris Group of San Diego, to help them build a strategy for ensuring public health services.

The consultant's initial contract is costing about \$25,000, but the task could wind up costing the county more than \$400,000.

Worries that MGH might falter as an independent community hospital are fueling supervisors' concern. Can the Marin Healthcare District overcome its history of acrimonious politics? What does Sutter Health's plans to expand Novato Community Hospital mean to MGH's finances? What if Sutter still wants to build a health care facility in Marin City? What happens to MGH's financial outlook if competition from Sutter leaves it with the job of caring for the uninsured and poverty cases? What happens if voters in the district refuse to endorse a bond measure to pay for the state-mandated seismic retrofit of MGH? What happens if the county finds itself in a position where it might have to assume control of MGH?

Those are questions for which supervisors want answers.

Supervisor Steve Kinsey said the board doesn't want to bet against the district successfully running an independent primary-care hospital. But the county has to be prepared for the financial and health care consequences if it fails.

The county relies on MGH, particularly for hospital care for needy patients. Supervisors are worried about the trauma center, mental health care and Marin's only maternity ward in the local hospital sea change.

Abaris's job will be to chart a strategy for the county.

The county needs to have a health "safety net" strategy amid all of the moving parts, Kinsey said

"We are trying to get smart," said Larry Meredith, director of the county Health and Human Services Department.

"I want it to give us the map for all of the what-ifs," said Supervisor Susan Adams, a nurse. "Can Marin County support four hospitals? What if Marin General Hospital doesn't make it?"

Meanwhile, the Marin Healthcare District is planning to hire a \$400,000 consultant to guide its takeover of MGH.

Overtures by the district to share the cost of a single consultant drew a "no thanks" from supervisors, who said they need to look at it from the county's perspective, which may not be the same as the district's.

Abaris is the same firm the county hired in 1998 to study the county's need for a trauma center.