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Sutter status switch prompts forum

By Elizabeth Wilson--Record-Bee staff

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LAKE COUNTY -- A public forum to discuss Sutter Lakeside Hospital's (SLH) proposed switch to critical-access hospital (CAH) status which would require the hospital downsize its inpatient bed capacity from 69 to 25 will be held during the Board of Supervisor's meeting Feb. 26 at 1:30 p.m. at the Lakeport Courthouse. Sutter Lakeside Hospital says they are in the process of educating the community about how critical-access is its best choice.

The hospital must increase revenue in order to avoid going into the red, which administrators fear could happen without becoming critical-access. Only one out of five Medicare patients pays the hospital in full. Under CAH status, Medicare reimbursements would increase, meaning four out of five Medicare patients' bills would be paid to the hospital. One SLH employee told the Record-Bee the proposed critical-access status has been a big buzz around the Lakeport campus.

"I've been told the patient turnaround will increase. I've been told they're thinking about having an area where patients wait for a room and they can get the room ready and that they're talking about administering med's in the waiting area," SLH employee Kimm Valencia said.

"Employees feel that with fewer beds, patients will be herded in and out of here like cattle. The fact that patients will be transported out of town, well that's a long drive to make and a long drive to visit a loved one," Valencia said. She added that employees are worried about potential lay-offs in the future.

"(That perception) is really inaccurate, we want to educate

people, but we don't have to convince people. We know this is a good decision. This is going to help us do some wonderful things. We just need to educate people about what it means to our community," SLH spokesman Mitch Proaps said.

"It's been brought to our attention that the union (United Healthcare Workers) is still unclear whether or not there will be lay-offs. I think most people would be surprised to know that we do not contemplate any lay-offs here. This revenue stream will enable us to recruit and retain employees not something we can do if we're worried about keeping the doors open," Proaps said.

The hospital has looked at four options to improve its financial stability.

One is to close services, including obstetrics and emergency services, "obviously that's rife with downside," Proaps said; the hospital has looked at limiting services and staff, including orthopedic surgeries and it has looked at "doing nothing," Proaps said.

"None of these options are perfect, clearly the option that has the least limitations 25 beds is critical-access, the level of staff is maintained, we're not looking at any layoffs, we'll maintain all of our physicians and 98 percent (of patients) would be continued to be seen here," Proaps said.

The 25 bed limit excludes examination or procedure beds, gurneys and operating room tables according to SLH CEO Kelly Mather. The increased Medicare reimbursement "will amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars each year, and increased flexibility from federal rules and regulations which will enhance our ability to provide the best care possible," Mather said.

Several county supervisors said the issue has generated much public interest, and expect the meeting will be well attended. "I think it might be a long discussion. It depends on how much public input we get. Often something is on the agenda after lunch if we don't know how long it's going to last," Supervisor Denise Rushing said.

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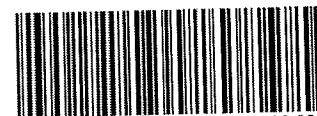
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