

Palm Drive directors at odds over regional strategy

New multi-hospital JPA group asks for money

by David Abbott

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Visions of what the Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) and Palm Drive Hospital hope to achieve collided with fiscal realities at the meeting of the district's board of directors last Thursday, and vision won the day, although the victory may prove to be symbolic.

The hospital district's chief benefactor Dan Smith spent his birthday listening to the board of directors engage in a heated discussion regarding a request from the JPA for \$10,000 in order to help fund the North Coast Integrated Health (NCIH) for the next few months.

The NCIH is the 501c(3) created when four hospitals — Palm Drive Hospital District, Sonoma Valley Health Care District, North Sonoma County Hospital District (Healdsburg), and the Mendocino Coast Health Care District (Fort Bragg) — merged under the JPA last year.

The purpose of the JPA is to give the hospitals a collaborative edge by pooling resources and expanding buying power. NCIH needs the money in order to pay administrative costs. All four hospitals are

being asked to contribute an equal amount in order to keep the non-profit afloat.

But there are those on the Palm Drive board who think it should be "mothballed" until its function has been established and thoroughly discussed, so that its mission can be determined to parallel the needs of the hospital. The hospital's ability to come up with the money is another big issue, as it is in the midst of Chapter 9 Bankruptcy proceedings and lack of cash flow is a major issue.

"It's too early for the NCIH, and the JPA needs to get its act together," said board member Frank Mayhew. "It's sucking up money supporting staff."

But Nancy Dobbs, who is a member of the Palm Drive Board of Directors as well as Vice Chair of the JPA Board disagreed, and took exception to a charge that the JPA is "running amok."

Dobbs thinks that the NCIH performs an important function in looking at the long-term health of its member hospitals, and believes that while it's important to deal with the current fiscal situation Palm Drive faces, it is also important to show faith in the JPA by providing material support.

A visibly flustered Smith added his voice to the debate, saying that the JPA is promoting ideas not con-

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tent with Palm Drive at
s time and decrying what
called a “lack of accounta-
ity.”

“There are too many lay-
s,” he said. “The JPA repre-
nts this board and this
ard needs to decide its pri-
ties. They’re making plans
ne of these board members
n’t know anything about.”

Board President Linda
Johnson put in the last word,
proclaiming, “But we have no
money.”

The board passed the reso-
lution to provide the funds by
a vote of 3-2. Those in favor
were board members Irma
Cordova, Bob Gillen, and
Dobbs. Opposed were
Mayhew and Johnson.

But debate continued after
the votes had been cast.

Smith questioned the
vision, scope, and goals of the
JPA and who it ultimately
serves.

“It’s not driven by the hos-
pitals, but has taken on a life
of its own,” he said. “I’m sorry
to see the vote go this way.
What the hell are you people
doing? You’re reaching too far,
too fast.”

From there, the board’s
recommendation goes to

interim CEO Lori Austin, who
called the vote “largely sym-
bolic” due to the hospital’s
budget woes, and said that
the issue will go before the
board again.

“I just received a pro forma
budget from the JPA,” she
said. “The board didn’t have
full information so we’ll have
to readdress the issue. We
have to balance between what
we can do and keep the vision
in mind, and keep readdress-
ing what we think it will be
and what we need now.”

Dobbs is adamant that the
NCIH represents the future of
health care in the region, and
that as soon as it “gets its feet
under it,” the advantages will
be obvious.

“We don’t have a stupid
public or stupid people on the
board,” she said. “Organizing
and building hospitals doesn’t
happen overnight. Let’s start
preparing the way.”

The vote went before the
board of the North Sonoma
County Hospital District in
Healdsburg Wednesday night,
and will be on the agenda at
the other two district hospi-
tals —the Sonoma Valley
Health Care District and the
Mendocino Coast Health Care
District (Fort Bragg)
Thursday night at 6 p.m.