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Hospital future is still up in air

West Side holds emergency session

By HORTENSIA M. LOPEZ
Bee staff writer

NEWMAN — Although time may be running out for debt-ridden West Side Community Hospital, board members Thursday night said they are not ready to make a decision about the rural hospital's financial future.

During an emergency session, board members examined the viability of opening a primary care clinic at the hospital in a joint venture with Merced Family Health Centers Inc.

"We're between a rock and a hard place as to where we want to take this hospital," board member Clarence Gomes said. "But I feel that we'll be making a decision soon."

change, the hospital would keep any revenue generated from its laboratory and ambulance services.

Board member Tom Homen said he is concerned that the 40-hour-per-week clinic would not address the void left by the closure of the hospital's emergency room.

Sullivan said the clinic would provide service 24 hours a day through an answering service. A physician's assistant would talk to injured or ill persons on the telephone and refer them to an emergency room or make a clinic appointment, depending on the nature of their illness or injuries, Sullivan said.

After suffering a severe cash crunch in March, the hospital was forced to close its emergency room and terminate inpatient services. Its ambulance, X-ray, physical therapy and laboratory services still are in operation. The hospital has about \$1 million in debts.

Merced Family Health has a network of clinics in Merced and Stanislaus counties, including one in neighboring Patterson.

The nonprofit Merced-based group, which would not pay the hospital rent to use a hospital wing, would establish and staff the clinic, according to Mike Sullivan, executive director. In ex-

Homen has said he would favor establishing a skilled nursing unit at the hospital because he fears Merced Family Health could pull out of the hospital to establish an independent clinic in the future and take all patients with it.

A skilled nursing unit, which would provide care for people with long-term illnesses, helped Dos Palos Community Hospital, which suffered economic problems similar to West Side's, gain financial stability.

However, board members have been warned by economic advisers that inpatient care services are obsolete and primary care clinics are the wave of the future.

Hospital's options seem clouded

By PATTY SCIARINI
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GUSTINE — It seems as if every avenue West Side Community Hospital's board of directors explores presents a larger problem as it tries to keep the facility afloat.

West Side was forced to close the doors to its emergency room in April after its subacute unit was unable to financially support the rest of the facility.

Merced Family Health director Mike Sullivan

has offered a proposal to the board in which his group will take over operations.

That plan involves a clinic operating 40 hours a week. However, board members have cited concerns the proposal does not address the needs of the community after those hours.

Another option is to try to rebuild the hospital from the bottom up, utilizing a distinct part-skilled nursing facility. Proponents of this plan want to follow the model of Dos Palos Memorial Hospital, which went through a similar experience about five years ago. However, some advisers have said that idea is impractical.