

Officials oppose W. Modesto clinic plan

By Steven Paul Motenko
Bee staff writer

A Merced organization's bid to place a full-service medical clinic on Modesto's west side has run into opposition from Stanislaus County officials.

The opposition stems from the availability of Scenic General Hospital's new family practice clinic, which is only used to about 50 percent of capacity.

A decision on the Merced-based Merced-Stanislaus Family Health Centers' application for \$290,000 in federal funds is expected within days.

"I'm a little concerned about putting a clinic with specialized services on the west side, even if it's funded by the federal government," said William Ulm, county supervisor.

Ulm said taxpayer dollars would be better spent on a less sophisticated nurse-staffed health screening clinic that would tie into existing medical services in Modesto.

Despite the sliding ability-to-pay schedule on which the proposed clinic's fees will be structured, Ulm said many poor people don't seek help at a doctor-staffed clinic because of the high price of medical care.

"Often pregnant women don't come in for medical care until the last minute because of the cost involved," Ulm said. "A screening program can provide better health service in the long run because people will partici-

pate."

A nurse-staffed clinic was operated in west Modesto by the Stanislaus Medical Society until late 1977, when the federal Department of Health, Education and Welfare changed its funding priorities and replaced the medical society's four nurse-staffed clinics with one physician-staffed facility in Patterson.

"I'm questioning whether a total clinic is the best use of the taxpayers money in west Modesto," said Ronald A. Pavellas, administrator of county-run Scenic General. "It seems to me we ought to insure full utilization of this \$1.2 million full service clinic (at Scenic)."

Pavellas also is a member of a local advisory council to the regional Health Systems Agency, which is charged with planning and overseeing all health services in the Stanislaus area.

At Pavellas' urging, the advisory council in December reviewed the Merced group's grant request. It agreed that the west side — bounded by Kanas Avenue on the north, Service Road on the south and the Southern Pacific Railroad Tracks on the east — is medically underserved.

But, the council added, "We have some reservations about the data in the application" and said the Health Systems Agency should "consider some alternative methods of solving these problems."

One possible solution is providing better transportation to the Scenic General clinic for west Modesto residents, Pavellas said.

"The farthest distance any portion of the west side is from Scenic is five miles," Pavellas said. "And the most populous area is only 2½ miles away. If the perceived lack of health care on the west side is just a matter of transportation, that's a whole other issue to be addressed."

Pavellas also said the Merced group has "drawn arbitrary lines around the area" in order to show that it's medically underserved. "If they incorporated two or three more census tracts they would incorporate all the doctors in Modesto."

Behind the scenes, some officials have charged the Merced-Stanislaus Family Health Centers with "empire building." The organization has responded, again in private, by charging that the county is merely trying to find sick people to fill its new half-empty clinic.

Glenn Frew, a planner for the Merced organization, denies the duplication charge, focusing on the proposed clinic's value as a neighborhood facility.

"We feel that a community-responsive health center will be more concerned with the treatment of the individual," he said recently. "Putting a bus on every corner is not necessarily the best way to offer access to health

care.

"Trying to fit people into a system that may be more efficient but may have less of a personal orientation may not be the best approach."

Frew also denied that the area outlined in the application represented a "devious configuration."

"What we're contending is that people in West Modesto, because of barriers such as the railroad tracks and the freeway, don't have access to adequate health care. We look at the area as being geographically contiguous with itself. We haven't tried to gerrymander anything."

The clinic, as proposed, would include the services of a physician, dentist, nurse, nutritionist and community health worker. In addition to basic medical and dental examinations, the clinic would provide a limited amount of patient transportation and would tie into existing emergency services, X-ray and laboratory services and other supplemental functions.

Some preventive services, including well-child screenings, immunizations and health education, also would be provided.

The clinic would be open to anyone, with fees based on ability to pay.

Frew said he had expected to have a decision from the federal government before the end of January. He said he has "no idea" how good the chances are.