



# Richmond Confidential

## California lawmakers to vote on bill that could prevent closure of Alta Bates medical center



Sutter Health plans to shutter the Alta Bates facility in Berkeley, but a proposed law might prevent its closure. Photo by Alex Matthews.

By [Alex Matthews](#) Posted 1 hour ago

It's the final week of this year's legislative session, and East Bay lawmakers are pushing a bill that could stop Sutter Health from shuttering its Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Berkeley.

Senate Bill 687, by local state Sen. Nancy Skinner, would require the attorney general to review and approve the closure of any emergency rooms run by nonprofits. Proponents say the law would preserve Californians' access to emergency medical services. Skinner authored the bill after Sutter announced it would close the Alta Bates campus.

Since the 2015 closing of Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo, an increasing number of Richmond residents have relied on Alta Bates for emergency medical care.

“When hospitals and emergency rooms close, patients pay the price with longer wait times and decreased health outcomes,” Skinner said in a press release. She contended that her bill “will create a layer of protection for the health of our communities.”

The bill has already cleared the state Senate, and lawmakers have until Friday, the last day of session, to pass it out of the Assembly.

Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia suggested that the bill is crucial. “We’re seeing closures of urban hospitals around the state and around the country that are jeopardizing emergency medical care in our communities,” he said.

Assemblyman Tony Thurmond, who represents Richmond, said during a press conference earlier this year that the closure of Doctors Medical Center tripled the number of ER visits to the city’s Kaiser hospital, which boasts just 50 emergency beds.

Gioia also argued nonprofit hospitals that receive a tax break should be held to a higher level of accountability.

Jan Emerson-Shea, a spokesperson for the California Hospital Association (CHA), disagreed. “Many hospitals are struggling with their bottom lines, due mostly to low Medi-Cal reimbursement rates,” she said.

She said that Skinner’s bill does nothing to address the underlying issues of why a hospital decides to close a facility. “It just adds another level of bureaucracy on top of it,” Emerson-Shea said.

One of those issues, according to Emerson-Shea, is the cost of retrofitting hospitals to seismic-safety standards. State law mandates that all hospitals be retrofitted by 2030. When Sutter announced last spring that it would close the Alta Bates campus, those requirements were the reason behind the decision, according to Gioia and Sutter Health’s public statement.

There is no specific timeline for the hospital’s closure, but in a written statement released in March 2017, Sutter Health said it intends to rebuild Alta Bates as an outpatient-only facility. Sutter will consolidate inpatient beds and emergency services at an Oakland location.

In a July 2016 resolution opposing Sutter’s announcement, Councilman Kriss Worthington wrote that Alta Bates “is crucial for providing timely healthcare services for the people of Berkeley and cities beyond Berkeley’s border.” The resolution also stated that the national average of acute-care beds was just under three per 1,000 residents. But in Contra Costa County, it was about half that: 1.4 beds per 1000 residents.

“Will there will be impacts on Richmond-area residents? Yes,” Gioia said. “What will the extent of those impacts be? I think we’re trying to fully understand that. Clearly, they will be negative.”

The supervisor also said there are no guarantees that the number of emergency-room beds will remain the same at a rebuilt Alta Bates. And, even if they did, there would still be a loss of inpatient beds, and an increase in travel time along the I-80 corridor for Contra Costa County residents.

If the bill is voted through by Friday, it will head to Gov. Jerry Brown’s desk. Though it is presumed the majority-Democrat Legislature will pass S.B. 687, the governor can be unpredictable: He doesn’t always approve bills along partisan lines.

Sign or veto, the battle for Alta Bates won’t end with the governor’s pen. If Skinner’s bill is enacted, it will then be up to the state attorney general to assess the impact of the hospital’s closure. This process would include a public hearing.

“No one wants to close a hospital,” Emerson-Shea said. “If you’re losing money from reimbursements, you can’t afford to keep your doors open.”

Gioia agreed; he noted that Doctors Medical Center was ultimately forced to close because it had too few patients with private insurance, and too many uninsured or on Medi-Cal.

But the supervisor doesn’t believe Alta Bates faces the same situation, because it’s part of a larger medical system.

“They can make a decision to keep a hospital open because they’re getting revenues from other sources,” Gioia said.