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Guest commentary: Maybe it's a deperation move, but it is one worth taking

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Article Text:

Those of us who live in West County understand the importance of Doctors Medical Center and we know that its closure will have serious consequences on health care. That's why we have been working diligently to save our public community hospital since its bankruptcy in 2006.

Since 2006, we have cut the hospital's losses in half and passed a parcel tax bringing in more than \$5 million annually in new revenue. But this hasn't been enough.

Not when Medicare and Medi-Cal do not fully cover the medical care costs of 80 percent of the hospital's patients.

Since the hospital's recent downsizing and the August closure of its emergency room to 911 ambulances, the imminent risk of total closure has become very real. Hundreds have rallied to save the hospital.

After discussions with DMC and county health department staff, nurses and physicians, the city of Richmond, Chevron, the Hospital Council of Northern and Central California, LifeLong Medical Center, the DMC Closure Aversion Committee, as well as community, labor and business leaders, we have developed a multi-stakeholder, five-year plan to save our full-service community hospital.

This plan depends on financial contributions from all key stakeholders. Let's be clear: The situation is challenging. DMC needs to close an \$18 million annual operating deficit and meet new state seismic guidelines.

But if all of the stakeholders step up and participate in this plan, discussed at the DMC governing board's last meeting, our public community hospital can be saved. Losing one stakeholder's participation loses everything.

Here's how it works.

First, Contra Costa County waives repayment of its cash advances to DMC, saving the hospital \$3 million annually. Second, other East Bay hospitals provide DMC with a debt service subsidy. Third, additional operating efficiencies are implemented to save money. Fourth, current labor negotiations with DMC employee unions produce savings. Fifth, Richmond provides DMC with \$15 million from its Chevron Community Benefit Fund.

Sixth, a revived Hospital Foundation raises funding from the corporate and foundation community. Seventh, develop a new teaching and residency program at the hospital to improve revenue reimbursements.

Finally, we pass a West County property tax measure -- one that is less than the May 2014 measure that failed.

This strategy includes a plan to meet California's seismic requirements by 2020. Funding will come from a new property tax measure and accumulation of a capital reserve.

This won't be easy. It will take commitment, sacrifice and compromise. But, when the hospital filed for bankruptcy in 2006, few believed it would still be open today. We know that innovative strategies and old-fashioned hard work can make a difference.

Some -- this paper among them -- call this a "Hail Mary" pass. It may be. But we are committed to working with others to make it happen. We would not do this if we didn't think it could succeed. It will take all the stakeholders working together to make this plan work.

John Gioia is a member of the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors. Eric Zell is chairman of the West Contra Costa Healthcare District. Both are residents of Richmond.

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