

California's oldest weekly newspaper of continuous publication

Mariposa Weekly Gazette

And MINER



A Vision For the Future

JCF officials are hoping Measure N will fund a new hospital

By Matt Johnson, Assistant Editor | September 17, 2020 | Reprinted with Permission

Editor's note: Measure N is on the ballot in the upcoming election and would, if passed, provide sales tax revenue to John C. Fremont Hospital. This newspaper will be featuring various stories over the next few weeks about the hospital. This is the second of a four-part series.



*JCF Plant Operations Manager Terry Woodward points out some of the features of the aging hospital. A new hospital must be in place by 2030 or JCF will face being shut down by the state.
Photo by Matt Johnson*

The John C. Fremont Healthcare District (JCF) finds itself in an interesting position.

Through Senate Bill 1953 (SB 1953), the state has mandated that all hospitals in California must meet stringent earthquake safety regulations by the year 2030 or face closure. But yet, the state is not going to provide any funding to help hospitals to come into compliance with those regulations.

That means that JCF — which does not meet those regulations at the moment — must find a way to either fund a new hospital or fund major renovations to the current, aging facility.

That's where Measure N comes into play.

Measure N is a 1 percent sales tax measure that will be on ballots this November in Mariposa County. If approved, Measure N will provide funds to build a new, seismically safe hospital. It will take a two-thirds majority.

A 1 percent sales tax is expected to raise approximately \$2.6 million annually. While it is unknown exactly what the total cost of building a new hospital will be, what is known is that similar healthcare districts serving similar communities have spent between \$50 million and \$80 million on new seismically safe hospitals.

Many Mariposans may be scratching their heads, wondering why Mariposa County needs to meet earthquake standards even though Mariposa County is not in a major earthquake zone.

But according to JCF operations manager Terry Woodward, Mariposa does have a fault line that runs through it. Maybe there isn't quite as much risk of a cataclysmic earthquake occurring in Mariposa compared to a place like San Francisco, but it could happen.

Woodward also said SB 1953 comes with a rating system for how safe hospitals are when it comes to seismic guidelines. JCF was rated SPC 1/NPC 2. What that means is that JCF received the lowest possible grade when it comes to being seismically safe.

“When they do this rating, it's a seismic rating of 1 through 5, with one being the worst and five being the best,” said Woodward. “The minimum rating a facility would have to pass at is a 3. Unfortunately, ours was found to be a 1, and a high probability of collapsing if we did have an earthquake.”

Back against the wall

Hospital officials stress that they have tried a number of times to be exempted or to meet less stringent requirements when it comes to SB 1953. There is even proposed legislation (Senate Bill 758) that would extend the current 2030 deadline by seven years, giving hospitals like JCF more time to comply with the seismic safety standards.

But eventually, JCF will need to comply, and building sooner affords two major benefits, according to hospital officials. One is that with construction costs constantly rising, the total cost will be less. The second is that the sooner it's built, the sooner the community reaps the rewards of having a larger emergency room, an operating room, more advanced and accessible diagnostic equipment, better accommodations in private rooms and many the other improvements that accompany having a modern, state-of-the-art hospital.

The next question becomes, does JCF really need a completely new hospital, or could it retrofit its existing facilities?

According to hospital officials, the hospital board of directors has given this and other options careful consideration, including in consultation with other healthcare districts, and professional architects and engineers specializing in hospitals.

But because the hospital was built almost 70 years ago, even a major and potentially very costly renovation would not meet all of the hospital's safety and patient care needs.

“It would cost more money to try to update what we already have, because of all the seismic changes they would have to make,” Woodward said.

It's kind of like owning an old vehicle. You might love that old vehicle and want to drive it for as long as possible. The vehicle might have its transmission go out. Then the wheels wear down. Then the engine breaks down.

Before you know it, it might be easier to just buy a new vehicle rather than trying to fix all of the issues on the old vehicle.

JCF finds itself in a somewhat similar situation. According to projections, building new would be more effective and efficient.

Plans call for the new hospital to likely be built on the existing campus next to the current hospital. It will include an expanded and enhanced emergency room with enough beds to reduce wait times, a surgical suite with a recovery area, easily accessible diagnostic equipment, more individual patient rooms with adjoining private bathrooms, a new lab, a pharmacy and many other amenities.

Existing buildings can be repurposed for many potential uses, and those to be determined during the design phase of the new hospital. For example, the primary care clinic was built in 1996 to the standards required for clinics at that time, and it will probably remain a clinic. Existing facilities could also be used to expand the Ewing Wing, for administrative offices or some other purpose that might be identified.

Looking ahead

If Measure N passes, JCF will need to act quickly to ensure the completion of a new hospital by 2030.

The initial planning and design stage will begin right away.

Many have wondered why there are no official blueprints which have been shared with the community. Hospital officials say that is because the first step for the architect will be to interview the doctors, nurses, specialists and other staff who work in patient care, food service, housekeeping and maintenance to design the building to best suit their needs.

Only after the architect thoroughly understands the needs, and works with the builder to make cost-saving adjustments, can the drawings be made and presented to the public.

This process keeps expensive change orders to a minimum.

Learn more

To learn more about Measure N, visit the Mariposans for a Healthier Future Yes on Measure N website at www.YesOnMeasureN.org (which features an extensive Frequently Asked Questions page) or find Measure N information on the JCF district website at www.JCF-Hospital.com.

#