

What's Next for Health Care?

by Rue Furch

A lot of issues are facing our part of the county right now. During the next few years, we will need to make hard decisions to assure a sustainable water supply, preserve the health of the Russian River, repair our deteriorating roads and bridges, protect our small farmers and business people and begin to draw up long-term strategies to deal with the uncertainty of climate change. I'll be talking to you about all of those things in the months ahead.

But one of the biggest issues, and one that affects all of us personally, is health care. Our costs are going up, and we wait longer to see our doctors. Many of us can't afford health insurance, while others are driving long distances to find medical care. Proposals to improve the availability and affordability of health care are being put forward at both the state and federal levels. But in Sonoma County, we can't wait.

- Our doctors are paid 8 percent less than those in Napa and Marin Counties for the same services – so doctors are leaving the county or fleeing private practice for a steady salary at Kaiser Permanente. A survey by the Sonoma County Medical Association showed that nearly than 50 percent of local physicians are considering leaving the county or retiring early because of the bleak financial picture.

- Our hospitals are failing as the cost of indigent care rises and the surgeries that once provided revenue are now being done elsewhere - in outpatient clinics or doctors' offices. Sutter Medical Center has thrown up its hands in despair, and could close its doors next year. Palm Drive Hospital in Sebastopol had to file for bankruptcy. Petaluma physicians are talking about building an outpatient surgery center because treatment costs are too high at Petaluma Valley Hospital – with dramatic financial consequences for the hospital.

There are some hopeful signs on the horizon.

- Palm Drive Hospital and three other community hospitals have banded together in a joint powers authority that is expected to help ensure long-term financial stability. These community-based hospitals will be able to share costs, including the costs of specialists and administrators. Working together, they will be in a better bargaining position for reimbursement from health plans and enjoy economies of scale from suppliers.

- The first steps are being taken to create a similar network, with similar long-term benefits, for community clinics in Occidental, Guerneville, Roseland and elsewhere in the county.

- Physicians who felt betrayed when local HMO Health Plan of the Redwoods

collapsed in 2002, are beginning to feel comfortable with building smaller networks. As with

hospitals, these physician groups help doctors cut costs and obtain better reimbursements. Groups have formed or are forming in Petaluma, Sonoma Valley and Santa Rosa. The joint powers authority is also talking about ways to bring doctors together.

But much more needs to be done. As your Fifth District Supervisor, I will tackle these problems head-on.

- We must build a cohesive health care system that includes our community hospitals and community clinics, providing affordable and accessible health care to people where they live. The joint powers authority recently formed by Palm Drive and three other small hospitals is a step in the right direction. But the county must throw its muscle behind this and other community-based medical services, lending support, leadership and, where possible, grant funding.

- Kaiser Permanente must expand its policies so that more Kaiser patients in West County can be seen at Palm Drive. Kaiser's membership is growing and its emergency room is overflowing, while Palm Drive offers extra beds and state-of-the-art medical care. Palm Drive's survival is critical for people throughout the sprawling West County, where many must drive for miles to get to medical care when minutes can make the difference between life and death.

- The county must join local doctors in their lawsuit to obtain fair and equitable reimbursement from the federal Medicare health plan. Medicare, which pays health care costs for those over 65 – the greatest users of health care – also sets the pace for private health plans for those under 65. A change in those reimbursement rates would help bring more specialists to Sonoma County, and allow us to retain our struggling family practitioners.

I know that if we work together we can improve health care and medical services for Sonoma County residents. In my years of civic service, from the elementary schools to the County Planning Commission, I've demonstrated my ability to get to the bottom of complex issues and work collaboratively with others to find innovative solutions. I'd like to work with you, too. If you have suggestions and ideas about our health care system, just email me through my website at www.ruefurchforsupervisor.com. I'm listening.



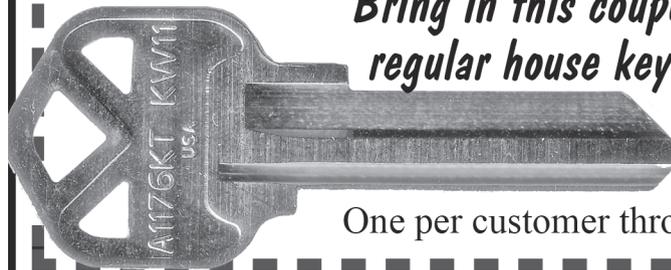
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