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Second opinions

Re "Hospital plan draws criticism," April 7

Everything related to the recent King-Harbor negotiations deserves criticism. As someone who has kept a close eye on all the events surrounding King-Harbor for several years, I find many of the L.A. County supervisors' responses rather ludicrous. I would also take issue with Supervisor Don Knabe's request that "people need to hold the criticism until we have all the details," when the Board of Supervisors and its representatives have purposefully kept the public out of the information loop by insisting on closed sessions.

I also wonder if the board has violated the Brown Act, because I don't seem to remember any reportable actions being reported after these closed sessions. One could assume that because the board seems to be pursuing a potential agreement with Pacific Hospital, some reportable action was taken.

GENEVIÈVE M. CLAVREUL
Pasadena

Hospital plan draws criticism

Some community members and experts fear Pacific Hospital is too small and untried to run King-Harbor.

By Garrett Therolf
Times Staff Writer

Some health experts and community leaders have criticized news that a small private hospital is the prime — and perhaps only — candidate for the contract to reopen Martin Luther King-Harbor Hospital, signaling possible continuing hurdles to reestablishing a hospital for the county's most underserved communities.

The 184-bed Pacific Hospital of Long Beach is simply too small and untested in the task of running such a complicated institution as a large public hospital, and the attempt is likely to fail, they said.

"It promises to be another inadequate response," said Sylvia Drew Ivie, a public health expert who led a blue-ribbon panel in 2005 appointed by the California Endowment to recommend ways to improve the troubled county-run hospital serving some of the poorest county residents of South Los Angeles and surrounding communities.

Drew Ivie's remarks, which were echoed by others who did not want to be identified for fear of offending county officials, drew a response of frustration from Los Angeles County officials and were likely to upset other activists hoping for a regenerated hospital.

The supervisors and county health services officials have been under pressure to reopen the long-troubled King-Harbor (formerly known as King/Drew) since closing its emergency and in-patient services in August after it failed a crucial inspection and was about to lose its federal funding.

"Negotiations are at a very critical and sensitive stage," said Supervisor Don Knabe. "People need to hold the criticism until we have all the details."

The Times reported last week that Pacific had emerged as the front-runner in a selection process that Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke, whose district includes the hospital, expected to be completed within two months. Burke also acknowledged that the county had so far failed to persuade the University of California system — or private candidates,

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King-Harbor plan draws criticism

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such as Catholic Healthcare West — to compete in earnest for a long-term agreement to operate King.

The county ended inpatient services at King-Harbor in August after years of failed attempts by the Board of Supervisors to reform the historic institution, treasured by African Americans as a symbol of renewal after the 1965 Watts riots.

The closure occurred under pressure from state and federal regulators whose latest sanctions followed the death of a 43-year-old woman who writhed unattended on the floor of the emergency room lobby for 45 minutes.

The hospital had been buffeted by problems almost since it opened in 1972.

But the current crisis began in earnest four years ago when a series of patient deaths was linked to serious lapses in care by nurses and other staff members.

Based on a variety of health indicators, the South Los Angeles area remains among the most disadvantaged communities in the nation.

More people die of lung cancer, stroke, diabetes and heart disease than in any other place in L.A. County. Diabetes rates are 44% percent higher than elsewhere in the county, hypertension rates are 24% higher, HIV/AIDS rates are 38% higher, and asthma rates are 11% higher.

County officials have expressed cautious optimism that Pacific would be an a partial solution to their problems despite the fact that it currently offers only basic emergency services and relatively few specialized programs. It proposes to begin at King-Harbor, in Willowbrook, with 77 inpatient beds next year, with hopes of gradually increasing the capacity year by year. The hospital once operated 400 beds.

Knabe chafed at any criticism aimed at Pacific, saying the candidacy would have to be treated especially delicately because "they're the only game in town."

"My biggest fear is that they'll get any negative publicity, and they'll just walk," Knabe said.

Faustino Bernadett, the owner of Pacific Hospital, is related through marriage to Knabe's chief deputy, Curtis Pedersen. The two men are both stockholders in the family business, Molina Healthcare, an insurer that is a separate entity from Pacific.

Knabe has been a friend of the family for decades, but he said that would not affect his ability to impartially evaluate Pacific's proposal.

"I really don't feel that I need to recuse myself," Knabe said. "If I felt that that would reopen the hospital, I would not have a problem recusing myself. The goal here is to reopen the hospital."

Yet the criticism of Pacific and the selection process continued unabated.

"It just feels like the county supervisors are ready to just grab anything and say, 'We did it. We reopened the hospital.' But the needs are so vast and the needs are so great. I don't know why they think half-steps are acceptable," Drew Ivie said.

Yolanda Vera, director of LA Health Action, a program that seeks to expand access to health coverage across the county, said, "I'm certainly disappointed there weren't more candidates stepping forward because it's such an important responsibility."

The matter also has become an issue in the heated contest to succeed the retiring Burke, who last week expressed confidence Pacific could pull off the reopening.

State Sen. Mark Ridley-Thomas (D-Los Angeles), a candidate for Burke's 2nd District seat, said: "There's a need for a more aggressive pursuit of viable options. This process is in jeopardy of just providing more of the same."

But Los Angeles Councilman Bernard C. Parks, Ridley-Thomas' main competitor in the race and who has received Burke's endorsement, said people should hold off criticizing the plan until Burke and her colleagues had had the chance to properly evaluate the proposal.

"I am pleased that there is progress being made," Parks said. "As always, the devil is in the details, but I don't think we should discount the county's efforts until the details come out."

Meanwhile, Bernadett and his partner, Patrick Soon-Shiong, have held private meetings with all the county supervisors, Ridley-Thomas and figures in the healthcare industry. Few details emerged from those meetings. The meeting with Ridley-Thomas was initiated by Soon-Shiong; Parks said it would be inappropriate to meet with the businessmen.

Ridley-Thomas, who said he could not disclose the contents of his meeting, criticized the secrecy that has surrounded the selection process.

"There has not been sufficient public communication of what's been done, which is part of the problem," he said. "There seems to be a view that this should be managed as quietly as possible, and given how devastating this closure has been to the public, there has to be a very public process and a very public resolution."

Drew Ivie, who said she knew little more than what she had read in the newspaper, was nonetheless ready to discount Pacific as a viable option. She is the daughter of the late Dr. Charles R. Drew, a trailblazing African American physician for whom Drew University, the longtime medical school affiliate of King, was named.

"With Pacific, the county is just half-stepping," Drew Ivie said. "They are just taking something rather than nothing. I think the community deserves more than that."

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Researcher John Tyrell contributed to this report.