

Thursday, August 16, 2007

LOCAL HEALTH

WHY SONOMA COUNTY IS RIGHT TO CREATE NEW PLANNING COUNCIL

The United States can no longer claim bragging rights to having the best health care system in the world. Once near the top of the charts as measured by longevity of its citizens, the U.S. has now dropped to a dismal 42nd, according to a recent Associated Press report.

Despite the fact that the U.S. spends more than any other country on health care, a combination of factors including lack of insurance, obesity, diabetes and shamefully high infant mortality rates for African-American children have contributed to its poor standing worldwide.

The federal government has failed in any meaningful way to address the problems, and while Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger promised reform this year in California, a budget standoff makes it's unlikely that a measure will be approved anytime soon.

Fortunately, folks in Sonoma County have been unwilling to accept the status quo. On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors approved the creation of a Community Health Improvement Action Council.

The council's creation is partly in response to the announced closing of Sutter Medical Center. The problems that led to and will be created by the hospital's closure are reminders of the fragility of the local health care system.

The council will focus on improving the overall community health, through identifying and preventing factors that lead to illness and injury. The council will look to various wellness initiatives, including school, work and community programs, for models.

A second goal of the council will be to "find solutions to local health care delivery problems." In non-bureaucratese, this means finding ways to ensure that hospitals stay open and that doctors don't desert Sonoma County in search of more lucrative places to practice.

These goals won't be easy to achieve. To a large degree, the success and failure of the local health care system is driven by outside forces. But public health officials are right to think locally as the United States' health care system deteriorates compared to its global counterparts.