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EDITORIAL

**Don't take hospital for granted**

***As Petaluma Valley Hospital undergoes operator transition, residents must stay informed***

Hospitals are critically important institutions, and the vital role played by the 80-bed Petaluma Valley Hospital is regularly illuminated by the lives that are saved there every week.

At a time when dramatic and often unpredictable changes in health care nationwide are causing some of these establishments to shutter — including one in Sebastopol that closed, reopened and is currently on life support — Petaluma residents should keep informed about what is happening at their hospital and ensure it continues its longstanding practice of providing outstanding healthcare services. It is, after all, your hospital, and the major changes afoot there warrant your attention.

If you live in southern Sonoma County, you're part of the Petaluma Health Care District. For more than 65 years, five elected representatives and their staff have worked to improve the health and well-being of you and your neighbors. The district's primary goal these days is guaranteeing uninterrupted access to quality emergency and acute care services at Petaluma Valley Hospital, which is in the midst of a very complex process of changing operators. There are no assurances that the proposed change will happen seamlessly, if at all.

For the last 20 years, the hospital has been successfully managed by St. Joseph Health under contract with the district. Negotiations aimed at having the Catholic healthcare provider continue operating the hospital broke down late last year over financial terms, a non-compete agreement and differences over women's reproductive health services. The district quickly launched a search for a new operator, and eventually signed a letter of intent with Paladin Healthcare Management, which operates four Southern California hospitals.

But complications over electronic medical record keeping systems have significantly delayed the transition to Paladin. Because St. Joseph has a computer system linked to other facilities in its network, it is not suitable for a standalone hospital. District officials now say an entirely new electronic record keeping system must be built before Paladin can take over operations, a process that could take up to a year and cost more than \$5 million.

At the moment, district officials are working to finalize a new operating agreement with Paladin along with a transfer agreement with St. Joseph. Once those deals are finalized, anticipated to occur by the end of this month, the electronic medical records system can be built. Only when that new system is operable will voters be asked to ratify the deal, according to the District CEO Ramona Faith, meaning that a new hospital operator might not be in place for up to 18 months.

For the time being, St. Joseph has agreed to continue operating the hospital, which is profitable and is consistently recognized for providing exceptional service. St. Joseph's continued commitment to Petaluma's hospital is much appreciated.

Still, the uncertainty about the hospital's future has already resulted in some employees leaving, while physician recruitment and retention is also becoming a problem.

Further complicating matters is the very real prospect that St. Joseph, which owns Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital, may one day be competing with Petaluma Valley Hospital. St. Joseph, which operates a family medicine outpatient clinic in Petaluma as well as the local hospice program, also manages the Petaluma Hospital Foundation, which attracts donations aimed at keeping the hospital's technology and equipment top notch. Untangling the 20-year relationship between St. Joseph and the health care district is, to say the least, a very tricky proposition.

As representatives of the district continue to navigate these turbulent waters, we wish them the best in their efforts to preserve quality local health care services. Petaluma residents should stay informed and do whatever they can to support the long-term viability of Petaluma's hospital.

For more information on the current status of hospital negotiations, go to [phcd.org](http://phcd.org), or email [pvh@phcd.org](mailto:pvh@phcd.org) to receive updates.