

Coastal Health Alliance votes for merger

By Silas Valentino

The Coastal Health Alliance will move forward with a merger with a Sonoma County health care center over twice its size, following a unanimous vote last Thursday by the alliance's board of directors.

The move is intended to sustain West Marin's three nonprofit clinics into the future, and comes after a joint committee spent six months exploring the idea.

C.E.O. Steven Siegel said the health alliance "realized that being part of a

larger organization is best for the community." He said the merger will help address staffing and space issues, and will maintain local representation.

"We want to maintain as much local control as possible," said Mary Szecsey, the executive director of West County Health Centers. Her group, headquartered in Guerneville, has eight clinics and over 235 employees, compared to the roughly 50 staffers at Coastal Health. Both are federally funded health centers.

Next week, a committee comprised of two staff members and two board members from each organization and a community health center consultant will meet to start hammering out details. If the plan reaches fruition, the health centers would officially align by Jan. 1, 2018.

According to the president of C.H.A.'s board, Carol Whitman, the consultant, Bobbie Wunsch, said the merger would be a remarkable fit.

"She's done a number of these and she said she's never seen such a good alignment," Ms. Whitman said.

The health alliance has reported difficulty recruiting new staff; in the last year, it has lost two doctors. It also serves communities with waning populations.

A comprehensive needs assessment conducted in 2010 said an increase in second homes was leading to a shrinking population and changes in demographics. The report recommended the nonprofit fuse with a larger health organization in order to maintain a strong base of patients.

The board considered aligning with other organizations, including the Petaluma

perfect counterpart in West County. The organizations have similar structures of primary care appointment scheduling, provider productivity expectations and clinical support staffing. They also use the same electronic medical records system and I.T. consulting firm.

Mr. Siegel said West County has an innovation hub with a full data department, a team dedicated to improving medicine delivery and a division that seeks new grants. If the merger goes through, C.H.A. patients would also have access to its wellness center, H.I.V. clinic and teen clinic.

The only possible change to C.H.A.'s staffing would be the elimination of Mr. Siegel's position—"Nobody wants two C.E.O.s," he said—but he supports the move because he said it's essential for a sustainable future.

The Coastal Health Alliance began in 1981 when local residents encouraged Dr. Michael Witte to open a bilingual clinic in Point Reyes Station to serve low-income community members. Under Dr. Witte's lead, they refurbished a house on Third Street and fashioned bedrooms into examination rooms.

By the end of the decade, the clinic was a nonprofit corporation housed in a new facility financed by donations and built on land donated by Richard Kirschman. In 1992, the group added a Bolinas clinic and a Stinson Beach clinic joined the following year.

Mr. Witte said he's familiar with West County Health Centers and supports the merger.

"They are really a strong organization," he said. "I think there's a lot of potential for sharing resources that could help out both organizations. If this goes forward, it would benefit West Marin. Their staff is twice as large, they have a larger dental practice and they have more behaviorists."