

# Sutter County supervisors seek more info on wellness

**clinic** Posted: Friday, July 17, 2015 10:50 pm

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The Sutter County Board of Supervisors delayed a decision to fund a \$700,000 employee wellness clinic to gather more information about the proposal.

In negotiations with employees, the county committed to funding the clinic, but the Sutter County Taxpayers Association criticized the project, and at least one supervisor voiced concerns.

Supervisor Barbara LeVake, appointed by Gov. Jerry Brown to fill a vacancy after the employee negotiations, on Tuesday requested the agenda item be delayed so she can learn more.

The need for the health clinic was due to the recent switch in health insurance administrators from Tri-County School Insurance Group to the San Joaquin Valley Insurance Authority.

A health and wellness clinic, which would provide non-emergency care for Sutter County employees, was provided by the Tri-County School Insurance Group (TCSIG), but is not by the San Joaquin Valley Insurance Authority.

In negotiations with employees, the county agreed to provide similar health benefits during the switch in administrators, which included a clinic, as part of the concession when employees agreed to increase their share of health insurance costs from 12 percent to 20 percent.

By agreeing to pay more of their health care costs, employees helped the county save up to \$900,000.

And while the clinic will cost the county money, that spending is more than made up for in savings from reduced health care premiums from the San Joaquin Valley Insurance Authority, said County Administrator Jim Arkens.

By switching, the county immediately saved \$1.1 million. It also avoided paying for an 8.5 percent rate increase, which would have cost an additional \$1.4 million.

"If we had to budget for TCSIG this year, we would have been laying off probably 10 people because that's \$1.4 million that we don't have," Arkens said.

The county also switched over its life, vision and dental insurance, which saved about \$250,000. And the new clinic will provide employee physicals, worker's compensation and health and drug testing, which usually cost the county another \$250,000 each year, Arkens said.

Arkens pointed out county departments funded by the state and federal government will use the clinic and pay for that use, meaning that state and federal government will pick up between 50 to 60 percent of the cost.

Board Chairman Ron Sullenger said he doesn't remember the health clinic being discussed in much detail during employee negotiations.

"I was so enthralled by the \$1 million we were saving on premiums that I neglected to take a closer look at the details on the health clinic," Sullenger said. "It was something we didn't spend a lot of time discussing. That's not anyone's fault but my own for not pursuing the details."

Now, Sullenger said, he is having issues with the fact he can't think of any other company in Sutter County that provides a health clinic for its employees.

"I need more justification that the clinic is not going to be a luxury benefit compared to the private sector in our community," Sullenger said.

LeVake said her questions have since been answered, and she is ready to move forward with the proposal.

"I think this will be a cost-saving measure for the county in the long term," LeVake said.

### **Taxpayer Association pushed county not to fund clinic**

The Sutter County Taxpayers Association recommended the county re-negotiate employee contracts to avoid funding a wellness clinic, pointing out the approximately \$600,000 the clinic will cost annually would be better spent funding recently requested county positions, including two sheriff deputies, an internal auditor and an information technology security officer.

(The initial funding would be about \$700,000 and then would drop to around \$600,000 annually, thereafter.)

Taxpayer Association President Pat Miller said there was not adequate publicity that funding a wellness clinic was agreed to in the new labor contract approved by the board in February.

"Had we known (those requested positions) were needed and could not be funded, it certainly would have made a difference in SCTA's response," Miller wrote in an email.

"Transparency is lacking, or we, as representatives of the taxpayers, could have fought for the empty, but needed, positions to serve the taxpayers."

Miller said the county needs to conduct an audit on the wellness clinic to establish if the clinic reduces costs or benefits for the employees.

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