

Supervisors agree to federal funds for MLK-Harbor

The federal government would pay about a third of the cost to run the hospital through mid-August. The county may pay the rest.

By SUSANNAH ROSENBLATT
Times Staff Writer

Los Angeles County supervisors voiced approval Tuesday of a federal offer to extend certification of the long-troubled Martin Luther King Jr.-Harbor Hospital through Aug. 15, although the deal provides funding for only a month more, forcing the county to pay up to \$38 million to keep the hospital open.

The deal, hammered out with federal officials late last week, preserves MLK-Harbor's accreditation and training slots for

250 medical residents as the hospital prepares for another federal inspection.

But the federal government would pay only about \$22 million of the estimated \$60 million it would cost to run the hospital through mid-August, county officials said. The remaining money is expected to come from the county's \$70 million tobacco tax fund. State officials said they might pick up part of the cost.

Supervisors voted to authorize the county health chief to negotiate details of the plan later this week. Federal funding was set to expire Saturday.

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Chernof told the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday. The offer "gives us the opportunity to complete our work on the schedule we've provided," Chernof said. Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky called it "an offer we can't refuse."

Chernof originally planned to discuss the federal proposal for the hospital, which serves some of the county's poorest residents, with the board in a closed-door meeting. After the board ended the public meeting for the closed session, in an unusual move, supervisors returned moments later to an empty chamber to discuss the matter publicly.

Healthcare activist Gene-

vieve Clavreul, who regularly attends board meetings, said she left before the discussion and complained that she did not know the board was going to talk about the funding issue. She said she plans to complain to Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley that the board had violated the state's open meeting law.

"I'm furious," she said. "I would have stayed."

The county launched efforts to downsize the hospital in Wilshire last fall after it failed a critical federal inspection. The failure almost cost the county nearly half the hospital's budget.

To persuade federal officials to give the hospital another chance, county leaders eliminated the facility's specialty services, shifted patients to other hospitals and put the former Martin Luther King Jr./Drew Medical Center under the

management of another county hospital, Harbor-UCLA Medical Center near Torrance.

The hospital recently reduced capacity to 48 beds; there are plans to expand to 120 beds by November.

County health officials plan to request a federal inspection in July. The hospital must pass an inspection before full funding and accreditation are restored.

If MLK-Harbor fails the federal check, the hospital loses federal funding and must start the certification process over.

"We're hopeful that they will pass certification," said Supervisor Mike Antonovich, "but, if they don't, then the taxpayers are unable to subsidize a standard medical facility."

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