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GUEST COMMENTARY

Important hospital decision

By RAMONA FAITH

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The Argus-Courier's Sept. 17 editorial, "Keeping city's hospital healthy," touched on just a few of the many challenges we face in today's health care landscape, including the rapidly rising costs of health care and hospital operations, national health care reform and the changing needs of our community. Another challenge we face at this time is communicating the complicated process associated with determining the future operator of Petaluma Valley Hospital.

At the Petaluma Health Care District, we take our role as the community's trusted health care leader and advocate for the best health-related decisions extremely seriously. Everything we do stems from our commitment to the health and wellbeing of this community.

Widely reported throughout the region, St. Joseph Health System's lease to operate Petaluma Valley Hospital ends in January 2017. Since embarking on a formal due-diligence process back in 2014, Petaluma Health Care District has made the public aware of our efforts to identify the best option for ensuring continued local access to a high quality community-based hospital.

In early 2015, we engaged the community through multiple interviews with key stakeholders, including physicians, nurses and other health care and health services staff, and those representing business and community services from various sectors of our community. The extensive feedback was compiled and discussed at the regularly scheduled PHCD board meeting in March.

The current and critical evaluation phase takes time, and we have created a process aimed at arriving at the best-suited partner for the future needs of our community. By starting this process with significant time before a final decision needs to be made, we are able to avoid rushing our candidates and ourselves. We have not specifically closed the proposal process yet, and as such, we are not in a position to name the responding operators, aside from our incumbent St. Joseph Health. Sharing this information at this stage has the potential to negatively impact our ability to negotiate the best hospital operation solution. This said, we are making steps toward formally announcing the interested providers and anticipate doing so in the coming weeks.

We will then move into the next phase of our selection process — engaging the community through public education and forums, and soliciting feedback that will help determine the best option for southern Sonoma County's long-term health needs. Ultimately, the community will vote on the hospital's future in 2016.

All of us affiliated with the Petaluma Health Care District agree that this is a critically important decision for Petaluma. For this reason, it is our duty to thoroughly evaluate, educate, listen and make a recommendation. We are ensuring a thorough due-diligence process with a thoughtful and appropriate

timetable that will allow ample opportunities for community input, and will ensure ample public notice for participation.

We promise to continue on in our steadfast mission to improve the health and well-being of southern Sonoma County residents, which includes ensuring the brightest future for our coveted Petaluma Valley Hospital. Determining the future of the hospital is the most important recommendation this board will make to this community and we will continue to engage our community in a thoughtful and transparent decision making process.

Please visit our website, [www. phcd.org](http://www.phcd.org), for information on the due-diligence process and a schedule of our public board meetings, at which public attendance is encouraged. (*Ramona Faith is the CEO of the Petaluma Health Care District.*)