

HOSPITAL-BASED HELIPORT -- YEA OR NAY?

SUMMARY

Marin is one of only two counties in California with no medical emergency heliport. An attempt in the mid-1980's by Marin General Hospital to establish a heliport on its own ended in defeat. Recently no less than four respected health organizations have championed the need for at least one hospital-based heliport in the county. The final authority, however, rests with the Board of Supervisors, who thus far have failed to bring the issue to resolution. The Marin Healthcare District Board seems to be equally passive in its treatment of heliports and their place in the health care system. The Grand Jury recommends that both the Board of Supervisors and the Marin Healthcare District Board muster the political will necessary to make a badly needed clarifying decision--and make it now.

BACKGROUND

Of the 58 counties in California, only two--San Francisco and Marin--are without emergency medical heliports. During the 1980's Marin General Hospital proposed a heliport, but because of neighborhood concerns about noise from the comings and goings of emergency vehicles abandoned the project. The recent spate of recommendations from various health care organizations for a heliport in Marin has prompted the Grand Jury to examine the progress of the ongoing battle to establish what many consider to be a vital element of emergency medical care.

METHODOLOGY

Interviews Conducted With:

Members of the Marin County Board of Supervisors.

Members of the Boards of Directors and/or operating officials of Marin General Hospital, Novato Community Hospital, Kaiser Permanente Hospital of San Rafael and Kentfield Rehabilitation Hospital.

Members of the Board of Directors of the Marin Healthcare District.

Personnel of Sutter Health.

Members of the county Health and Human Services Division, the Marin Emergency Medical Care Committee, the Helicopter Task Force and members of fire districts.

Hospital-based Heliport – Yea or Nay?

Documents Reviewed:

The Trauma System Consultation published by the American College of Surgeons Committee on Trauma dated September 20, 2002, and provided to the Marin County Emergency Medical Services Committee.

Various articles published in the Marin Independent Journal.

Minutes of meetings of the Board of Directors of the Marin Healthcare District.

The report of the Helicopter Task Force and cover letter from the Marin County Emergency Medical Care Committee transmitting that report to the Marin County Board of Supervisors.

Information Concerning Hospital Heliports and Emergency Medical Service Landing Sites, published by the Department of Transportation, State of California.

Trauma System Plan 2003 Draft Update, Marin County Department of Health and Human Services, Health Services Emergency Medical Services Program.

Proposed Revisions to the Trauma System Plan, Marin County.

Handout from the Public Forum on Proposed Revisions to the Trauma System Plan, Tuesday March 25, 2000.

Internet Sources:

Emergency medical service policies
www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/HH/main/ems/documents/Policies/5100.pdf

The Board of Supervisors, Marin County
www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/BS/main/index.cfm

Health and Human Services Department of Marin County
www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/HH/main/index.cfm

Emergency Medical Services Program, Marin County
www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/HH/main/ems/index.cfm

Health services provided by county offices as described by the California State Association of Counties (CASC)
www.csac.counties.org/counties_close_up/what_do_counties_do/health_services.html

Sutter Health, Community Based, Not For Profit
www.sutterhealth.org

DISCUSSION

The Need

In August 2002, a Site Visit Team of the American College of Surgeons reviewed the Marin County Trauma System. In a published consultation, the team stated that failure to provide a heliport will preclude injured patients from receiving optimal care in Marin County in the shortest time possible. The team indicated that a heliport should be constructed at the designated trauma center and perhaps at all hospitals.

The Marin County Emergency Medical Care Committee (EMCC) commissioned the Helicopter Access Task Force to address the question of a hospital-based heliport with regard to the best interests of patients, emergency responders, and the community. In October 2002, the task force's report recommended the establishment of at least one hospital-based heliport within Marin County. The EMCC forwarded the report to the Board of Supervisors with its unanimous support of the recommendation.

The 2003 draft Marin County Trauma System Plan, prepared by the Department of Health and Human Services, contains a "Needs Assessment" section with justification for a hospital-based heliport.

The Obstacles

Aside from the expected and understandable opposition from those who live in the immediate proximity to likely heliport sites, it appears to the Grand Jury that the delay rests with procedures and bureaucratic niceties. The Board of Supervisors has failed to expedite the chain of events that will make hospital-based heliports in Marin a reality or not, rather than the subject of endless debate, recrimination and newspaper headlines.

The State of California has delegated to the Board of Supervisors the legislative authority to govern Marin County. Under this authority, it is the Board of Supervisors that is responsible to take those policy actions that will enable county government to provide an appropriate level of health care to the citizens of Marin County. It is also responsible for ensuring that mandated functions are properly discharged.

According to Marin General Hospital and Kaiser Permanente of San Rafael, neither has been asked by the Board of Supervisors for a "needs assessment," a first step in the journey to a heliport.

The Marin Healthcare District Board of Directors has not solicited a needs assessment from Marin General Hospital, the most likely candidate for a heliport. Nor has the Healthcare Board acted on its own to recommend to the Board of Supervisors that a heliport be established (or not established) at Marin General Hospital.

Here is the conundrum: one Supervisor, according to the *Marin Independent Journal*, stated that the burden of proof for the need of a heliport rests with the hospitals and not with the Board of Supervisors. But Marin General Hospital and Sutter Health, the operator of the hospital, have declared that it is the Board of Supervisors that must decide if the county needs a heliport, not the hospitals. A request for a “needs assessment” by the Board of Supervisors is a necessary step in supplying the Board with a management tool to make the go or no-go decision that only it can make.

Money is not a factor in the equation, at least not for the county. Marin General Hospital and Sutter Health have made clear to the Grand Jury that they will be responsible for funding and building the heliport after all requirements are met. Once the Board of Supervisors has identified a hospital-based heliport as a necessary feature of Marin medical care, it is the hospital that is responsible for shepherding the process from policy direction, concept and design approval, application for land-use approval, and state permission to operate an established heliport.

The Department of Health and Human Services is moving forward, smoothing the way for the Board of Supervisors, by conducting public forums on the Trauma System Plan 2003 Draft Update. These forums include discussions and input regarding the establishment of one or more hospital-based heliports. But, forum or no, there is no substitute for political will by the Board of Supervisors to declare either for or against heliports in Marin. Elected officials should be prepared to take the heat; it goes with the territory.

After all the consultations, after the work of many committees, after the reports provided by professionals, after the recommendations from many reliable sources, after much community input, and after many years have passed, the status quo prevails.

THERE IS STILL NO YEA OR NAY DECISION!

FINDINGS

1. Marin and San Francisco are alone among all California counties in lacking hospital-based heliport facilities.
2. Earlier attempts by Marin General Hospital to establish a hospital-based heliport have failed.
3. The American College of Surgeons and the Emergency Medical Care Committee have both determined that at least one hospital-based heliport within Marin County would improve emergency health care.
4. The Marin Healthcare District Board has failed to ask for a “needs assessment” from the most likely candidate for a heliport, Marin General Hospital.

5. The Marin Healthcare District Board has failed to make a formal recommendation to the Board of Supervisors either for or against a hospital-based heliport.
6. The Board of Supervisors is responsible for county health care policy.
7. The Board of Supervisors has the final authority for the Marin County Trauma System Plan that could include a hospital-based heliport provision.
8. The Board of Supervisors seems to lack the political will to resolve the hospital-based heliport issue.
9. Marin's hospitals will take no action until the Board of Supervisors includes a hospital-based heliport in the Trauma System Plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Board of Supervisors should immediately ask Sutter Health, Marin General and Kaiser for "needs assessments" and thereby start the process of evaluating the need for hospital-based heliports in Marin.
2. The Marin Healthcare District Board, using a "needs assessment" obtained from Marin General Hospital, should make a recommendation to the Board of Supervisors for or against hospital-based heliports in Marin.
3. The Board of Supervisors should decide immediately whether or not Marin County should have a hospital-based heliport.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

- Pursuant to the provisions of Penal Code Section 933.05, the Grand Jury respectfully requests responses as follows:
- From the Marin County Board of Supervisors to Findings 6 through 8 and Recommendations 1 and 3.
- From the Marin Healthcare District to Findings 4 and 5 and Recommendation 2.

Although not legally required, the Grand Jury also invites responses from:

- Marin General Hospital to Findings 2 through 4 and Recommendation 1.
- Sutter Health to Recommendation 1.
- Kaiser Permanente Hospital of San Rafael to Recommendation 1.