

17 hospital buildings in county on state list of seismic risks

Tom Kisken, Ventura County Star, 10-9-10

A 117-bed hospital wing in Ventura. A maternity ward in Thousand Oaks. A Camarillo hospital building with 81 general care beds. An intensive care unit in Santa Paula.

All are found on a list of 17 hospital buildings in Ventura County rated by the state of California as seismic risks that could suffer significant damage, including partial collapse, in a major earthquake. About 700 buildings at hospital campuses across California are in the same category.

The ratings and state mandates to rebuild or renovate the structures to meet new standards are the gas pedal on a race that began 16 years ago with a state law establishing deadlines that have since been slid back several times.

Currently, hospitals are working to meet the state's Nov. 1 edict for update information, likely confirming what many observers say they already know: Many facilities throughout the state won't finish building in time, forcing legislators to again consider pushing back deadlines intended to protect public safety.

"It has to happen because what's your next best option?" said physical scientist Charles Meade, who has co-written studies on seismic standards. He envisioned the consequences of enforcing current law and shutting down patient care in hospitals as soon as 2013.

"The last thing these communities want to see is these hospitals shut down," he said. "You can imagine all the fallout that would occur."

Hospital officials in Ventura County say they'll meet the deadlines. Simi Valley Hospital and Los Robles Hospital & Medical Center in Thousand Oaks have already opened new patient care wings, although both hospitals are working to bring other parts of their campuses into compliance. Leaders at other sites work at securing as much as \$300 million in funding or beginning initial environmental studies.

"We are aggressively moving forward, and we will have this done well before the deadline," said Paul Lorenz, administrator at Ventura County Medical Center, which has to replace a 100-bed swath of its main hospital by 2020 and expects to complete the \$150 million-plus project four years before that.

Seismically challenged buildings are speckled across Ventura County at nearly every hospital built before standards changed in the 1970s: county-run hospitals in Ventura and Santa Paula, Community Memorial Hospital in Ventura, St. John's Pleasant Valley Hospital in Camarillo, Simi Valley Hospital and Los Robles Hospital & Medical Center in Thousand Oaks.

According to records from the California Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development, 17 structures at the hospitals are rated as potentially life-threatening hazards, or in state lingo, as Structural Performance Category 1.

"Those buildings are at risk of collapse during a major earthquake," said Paul Coleman, a deputy director at the Health Planning and Development office, asserting the need of hospitals not only to survive but also to deliver care to victims.

Hospital officials say that even old patient care facilities are built to higher standards and may suffer damage in

an earthquake but almost never collapse. Administrators reject the notion their buildings are out of compliance, noting that new standards don't begin to become effective until 2013. Some said their hospitals are being pushed to upgrade largely because of the age of their hospitals.

"Based on all the history of California, based on what our engineers say, I don't believe the patients are at any risk," said Gary Wilde, CEO at Community Memorial Hospital in Ventura. "The sensationalism needs to be tempered with facts."

The more realistic risk is that a hospital would remain standing but see its ability to provide care reduced, said Wilde.

"It's not so much that the building's going to fall over dramatically, but the building would no longer be able to provide the services to the community if seriously damaged," he said.

It's impossible to draw broad generalizations about the seismic risks of hospital buildings or any other structures, said Tom Heaton, a professor of engineering seismology at California Institute of Technology in Pasadena. Some buildings built before 1973 are structurally as strong as contemporary buildings. Others that rely primarily on concrete columns to separate floors can be life-threatening seismic risks.

"The worst of those buildings in my opinion are likely to be the future source of the greatest fatalities in California," he said.

The SPC-1 rating means a building has more than a 1.2 percent chance of collapse in a major earthquake, meaning it reaches a magnitude likely to occur within the next 30 years. SPC-1 buildings very near that 1.2 percent standard are likely safe enough to continue operating until 2030, said Joe La Brie, a Los Angeles structural engineer and chairman of a hospital safety and building board that advises the state Health Planning and Development office.

The problem is that some hospitals across the state have collapse probabilities far higher than 1.2 percent, La Brie said.

"We know that 20 percent chance of collapse is something that should be out of there and there are hospitals out there with that kind of collapse probability," La Brie said, noting the scenario doesn't necessarily mean total devastation. "It's not the whole building coming down at one time. It could be a portion of the building collapsing."

It will cost Community Memorial Hospital about \$166 million to build its new hospital and more than \$100 million to make it completely operational. Hospital officials, who have worked on securing bonds for two years, say they would pursue the project even without the seismic issues because much of their complex was built in the mid-1960s.

If the state mandates weren't in place, county officials say they would also still go ahead with plans to replace a 100-bed portion of Ventura County Medical Center at a cost of as much as \$200 million. They say the costs of the project, which still needs approvals, will be absorbed by the hospital's operating budget, meaning it will be supported by state and federal money but not by hikes in county taxes.

According to the state, Ventura County Medical Center has four buildings rated as severe risks, but county officials say one non-medical building at the hospital now has a better rating. Lorenz said two-thirds of the hospital's acute care facilities already meet the state's new seismic standards.

Los Robles Hospital & Medical Center in Thousand Oaks is one of many California hospitals that is gambling on receiving an extension. Hospital leaders are confident that if they can begin construction on a \$245 million construction project in January, the state will push back its seismic standards deadline from 2013 to 2015.

The construction isn't scheduled to be completed until 2018, but enough of it should be finished by 2015 so the hospital meets the new standards, CEO Gregory Angle said.

The deadlines are a maze. Hospitals that once were mandated to finish seismic compliance in 2008 were given an extension to 2013, and many expect to qualify for an additional two-year delay. Many public hospitals have a deadline of 2020. Hospitals that are able to show a building isn't as severe of a risk, may not have to build a new facility until 2030.

The chain of extensions has already brought backlash, with some state officials and legislators saying it's time for hospitals to comply. But it seems a foregone conclusion in a recession when profit margins are diminishing that many hospitals across California won't build or retrofit in time.

State officials projected several months ago as many as 139 hospitals may not meet seismic mandates. As laws stand now, their patient care would be stopped, said Coleman of the Health Planning and Development office.

But some observers contend that the state will never push hospitals delivering needed healthcare out of business. That's why the 2008 deadline was pushed back, said Dr. Patrick Reiten, a Thousand Oaks general surgeon who helped create the Thousand Oaks Surgical Hospital in 2005.

"They kicked the can down the road because what they were facing was a huge number of hospitals that were going to have to close," said Reiten, predicting the can will be kicked repeatedly. "It will never be enforced. It will be extended forever."

List of seismic-risk hospital buildings

According to the California Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development, 17 hospital buildings in Ventura County are at risk of collapse in a major earthquake. Here's a list of the buildings and the hospitals' plans to fix them.

- ◆ Community Memorial Hospital, Ventura: Four buildings, including the hospital's main building, the Goodyear wing, the west wing and the gift shop. Hospital leaders are pursuing funding for a \$300 million construction project expected to be completed in 2014.
- ◆ Ventura County Medical Center, Ventura: Four buildings, including a wing of the main hospital, the administration building, steam plant and switch building. Initial environmental studies have begun for a planned \$150 million-plus construction project scheduled for completion no later than 2016. County officials say they have only three high-risk buildings because the switch building's rating has been changed by the state.
- ◆ Simi Valley Hospital: Four buildings, including parts of the original hospital building with limited patient care services and three structures with no direct care programs. The hospital opened a \$75 million patient care tower two years ago because of seismic mandates and is considering alterations that will allow it to continue using parts of the original hospital building until 2030.

◆ Los Robles Hospital & Medical Center, Thousand Oaks: Two buildings, including the north and south wings. The hospital opened a \$120 million patient wing three years ago and is preparing to start on a \$245 million addition in January.

◆ St. John's Pleasant Valley Hospital, Camarillo: The main hospital building, encompassing 81 general care beds. By the end of 2014, acute care services will be transferred to a part of the campus compliant with seismic standards.

◆ Santa Paula Hospital: Two structures, including the main building and the intensive care unit addition. County officials plan a retrofitting project that would extend the deadline to 2030 for the buildings to be replaced.