

Paperwork filed by group hoping to pass sales tax to construct new hospital

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Mariposa County Chief Deputy Clerk Courtney Morrow, left, and Mariposa County Clerk Keith Williams look over paperwork delivered last week to their office by the Citizens to Save the Hospital group. Shown from the group are Beth Tomsick, right, and Suzette Prue. Photo by Greg Little

If at first you don't succeed...

That's what a local group is working on when it comes to having a hospital in Mariposa County.

"Citizens to Save the Hospital" is a group of concerned citizens who last week presented paperwork to county officials in what they hope will be a successful attempt to increase the sales tax in the county by 1 percent to pay for a new hospital facility.

A similar effort last year fell just short of the 66 percent of votes required to pass such an initiative.

On Wednesday morning of last week, local resident Beth Tomsick and Suzette Prue arrived at the office of the Mariposa County Clerk with paperwork in hand. They are part of the group which is hoping to find a way to convince voters to pass the initiative.

A new hospital has been in the works for years, but finding the money has been the obstacle. According to the state, because of earthquake requirements, a new hospital must be built by 2030 or the current facility will be forced to close.

John C. Fremont Healthcare District officials were hoping to have the funding already going with the ballot initiative last year, but when that failed, the local group decided not to give up.

Though the hospital board cannot advocate for an initiative, a citizens group can, which is precisely what they are trying to do once more.

The proposal is to have a 1 percent sales tax implemented and that tax is estimated to have to be in place for 40 years to meet the massive funds that will be needed to build a new hospital. The group estimates it will cost in the neighborhood of \$80 million to construct a new facility.

After last week, that process is now underway.

“All the pieces are here,” said Courtney Morrow, chief deputy clerk of Mariposa County when handed the paperwork.

The next step, said Morrow, is for the paperwork to be given to the office of the Mariposa County Counsel, which then has 15 days to approve the documentation.

Once that happens, the local group will then begin its effort to acquire signatures of registered voters so the initiative can be placed on the ballot.

The election is set for June 2022, at least tentatively. Because it is a non-presidential election year, Morrow said the state is expected to have the primary in June, as opposed to March when the last primary was held. However, because redistricting is currently in the beginning stages as a result of the census, that date could change, she said, depending on the decision by state officials.

The paperwork submitted by the citizens group last week outlines various state regulations which have to be followed when it comes to doing a petition.

Also, it spells out “accountability and transparency” conditions which would have to be followed by the hospital district should the sales tax pass.

That includes establishing a specific fund within the district to deposit all of the money received from the sales tax. The fund would have to be maintained for the specific purpose of construction a new hospital.

It also requires the hospital district to devise a “General Implementation Plan” to be shared with the general public. That plan would serve as the “general guide,” according to the paperwork as well as provide a general timeline for implementation of the plan.

Also, it would require the board of directors of the hospital district to prepare a quarterly financial report “summarizing any expenditures” as well as status of any projects or descriptions of any programs or services funded from the proceeds of the sales tax. It is required to be a public document.

Finally, it requires the hospital district to prepare an annual progress report for the public, describing “progress made toward implementation of the” expenditure and general implementation plans.

More information about the plan will be released in the near future once the county verifies the paperwork and the group begins the process of collecting signatures.

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