

Ukiah Valley Medical Center



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Local Health

By Terry Burns, UVMC President/CEO

More on Coming Health Care Changes

During the past few months, we continue to hear a lot about health care changes from Washington, D.C., and Sacramento. This column is the second in a series in which I'll discuss the changes that may be coming and the possible opportunities and dangers we may face as a result. This time, I'll mostly focus on challenges at the state level and how they may affect us locally.

When I speak about health care reform, I mean the changes to our current health care system. This will likely include a plan to cover most citizens' health needs and a strategy to reduce health care costs (to keep health care from consuming our national economy).

Our State government today is realizing the cumulative effect dysfunction that started before Proposition 13 was passed, 30 years ago. I'm one of a large portion of Californians who voted to cap the taxing authority of the State. I confess that I may not have been informed when I voted for this bill, but I surely remember what I took as arrogance on the part of the governor and legislature who publicly railed against anyone who would dare limit their ability to do as they pleased with *our* funds. They promised immediate cut-backs in education, public safety, and other services, but none of that occurred.

What did occur, in response to perceived continued arrogance and lack of voter connection on the part of elected officials, was that voters took matters into their own well intentioned, but misguided hands. We voted for criminal justice "reform," education "reform," and even various aspects of health care "reform." We also voted for numerous politically popular projects from new roads to better parks, and threw in term-limits as a further constitutional modification. Every one of these votes took responsibility out of the hands of elected officials, effectively minimizing their ability to strategically lead our state. Today, with the economic tsunami reducing revenues, our legislature is trapped by the "locks" imposed by Prop 13 and other mandated funding. They don't have the flexibility to make the hard choices to get us out of this financial mess.

Challenges in Sacramento are likely, at least in the short-term, to have a greater impact in Mendocino County than in other parts of California. We are more dependent upon direct and indirect governmental funding than most communities. We have a very limited number of independent businesses in our region – businesses that provide significant year-round employment and produce goods and services sold outside of our community.

Most of the major employment in our community is government-sponsored, including city and county offices, CalTrans, the Department of Forestry, and our public schools. The hospitals, which I'm part of, provide services which are dependent upon those government-connected

employers listed above and the other employers who are able to provide their employees with health insurance. Between the direct governmental employers and the social programs they administer, a huge percentage of our community is directly dependent upon decisions in places like Sacramento and Washington DC. When government flinches, the rest of the county shakes a little, but our community feels a giant earthquake!

Here is what is coming from the State:

1. Cuts to the County – cuts are expected to virtually every program affecting health and human services, public safety, road maintenance, and more
2. Cuts to the City – cuts are expected to all State-funded programs
3. Cuts to any organization which receives funding to support their services, such as the Ukiah Senior Center, Ford Street Project, all local hospitals, and our great system of health care clinics that provide primary medical care to 60% of our citizens

I've appreciated hearing some really good ideas from many people. Feel free to share your thoughts with me. I can be reached at 463-7360.