

# Planned closure of Alta Bates raises concerns of a health care desert

A drop in the number of people hospitalized spurs Alta Bates closure, although ER visits are up



Donald Goldmacher, of Berkeley, is photographed near the Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Berkeley, Calif., on Monday, Oct. 24, 2016. Goldmacher, 75, has had a number of emergency situations that have required treatment at Alta Bates, and is concerned about the hospital's impending closure. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

By **KARINA IOFFEE** | [kioffee@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:kioffee@bayareanewsgroup.com)

PUBLISHED: October 30, 2016 at 8:00 am | UPDATED: November 1, 2016 at 10:51 am

**BERKELEY** — The announcement earlier this year that Alta Bates Summit Medical Center would close its campus here by 2030, sent shock waves through the East Bay. Cities issued resolutions calling for the hospital to stay open, and “Save Our Hospital” signs popped up on lawns and in store windows.

Coming just a year after Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo closed following a long struggle to stay solvent, Alta Bates' plans to shutter have stoked fears that a large swath of the East Bay is turning into a health care desert that will result in delays in care for those facing life-threatening conditions and longer waits for inpatient procedures.

Others, however, see it as the inevitable result of changes in health care over the past decade, as outpatient services become more common, hospital stays shorten and consolidation increasingly becomes the solution to rein in out-of-control costs.

Data show the overall need for hospital beds is falling even as emergency rooms become more crowded. But for residents who have spent their lives relying on Alta Bates for care, its anticipated demise is wrenching no matter how the decision is spun.

“I know for certain that this hospital has saved my life, on numerous occasions,” said Donald Goldmacher, 75, a Berkeley resident who has received three emergency angioplasties at Alta Bates since 1988.

Rather than cutting services, Alta Bates’ owner, Sutter Health, says it is consolidating care at its sister campus, Summit Medical Center, three miles away in Oakland. The hospital chain has also said that Alta Bates’ Ashby Avenue campus, built in phases starting in 1959, does not meet new seismic safety requirements that all California hospitals must adopt by 2030.

“If we are to remain viable as an organization and affordable to our patients, we cannot operate two full-service hospitals less than three miles apart,” said Carolyn Kemp, a spokeswoman for Alta Bates Summit Medical Center, in an email.

Since 2005, the rate of hospitalizations, measured by total days patients spent in the hospital, has decreased by 23 percent at Alta Bates, according to an analysis of state health care data by this newspaper. But emergency room visits shot up by 15 percent during the same period, according to the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development.

Without Alta Bates, there would be only one ER along a 25-mile stretch of Interstate 80 from Vallejo to Oakland, a thoroughfare prone to nightmarish traffic jams.

Under the new plan, Sutter will open an urgent care center in Berkeley and transfer all hospital operations to Summit. It has also said that it will double the number of beds at Summit and the emergency room there.

But with few details available yet, many are worried that the closure would leave a significant number of East Bay residents without close access to a hospital.

“People have a right to decent health care, and the lack of it in their community will lead to death,” said Margy Wilkinson, 73, and a Berkeley resident. “Summit’s decision does not take the community’s needs into account.”

Alta Bates emergency department opened in 2005 and has seen a steady increase in traffic. Despite that, hospital officials earlier this year have said they would close the hospital and move all ER services to Oakland.

Last spring, Doctors Medical Center, which recorded an estimated 33,000 visits a year, [closed after more than a decade of financial losses](#). Today, the only hospital between Vallejo and Berkeley — an area that is home to more than 250,000 people — is Kaiser Permanente in Richmond, which has just 50 beds.

Since 2014, hospital admissions at Kaiser Richmond have tripled, forcing the hospital to operate above capacity on most days, said Mark Fratzke, a Kaiser spokesman. Emergency room visits are up 29 percent this year.

Already, some observers have taken to describing West Contra Costa as a “health care desert,” even as medical clinics have sprung up to fill in the gaps.

[Sutter Health](#) contends that at least a third of those now seeking care in its emergency rooms can be better served on an outpatient basis, saving both the hospital and patients money. About half of a hospital’s expenses are for staffing due to staff-to-patient ratios mandated by the state.

At least some of the plans are the result of changes to the way health care is delivered. A decade ago, a patient could be guaranteed a stay in the hospital for bariatric surgery, total knee repair or a hernia repair. Today, these patients are increasingly operated on and released the same day, reducing the demand for hospital beds.

But the [California Nurses Association](#), the union that represents 100,000 nurses in the state, including 1,800 at Alta Bates, and some local politicians have sought to portray Sutter’s decision as financially motivated. Sutter Health, a nonprofit chain of 22 hospitals, [earned \\$400 million in total income](#) in 2014, and paid its recently retired CEO, Patrick Fry, \$3.6 million a year in base compensation, [according to tax records](#).

“They clearly have the money to make that (seismic) investment, but they seem to be making a decision to not do so,” said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond.

Nurses say the wait times at Summit are already long and may get longer once Alta Bates closes.

“If there are no beds up in the hospital, it all backs up through the emergency room,” said Mike Hill, a nurse at Summit.

The Berkeley Fire Department estimates that since Alta Bates’ Cath Lab, a specialized department that treats cardiac cases, relocated to Summit in 2014, it takes an additional 12 minutes to transport a patient.

“Right now, city resources are being used by a private company to save money at the expense of Berkeley taxpayers,” said Assistant Berkeley Fire Chief Dave Brannigan.

Once Alta Bates closes, ambulances will have to drive all patients the extra distance.

Others believe that Sutter is right to shift focus amid a changing health care industry in order to provide good care.

“I think it’s important that Alta Bates remain in the community, especially the birthing center, but we’re in a changing environment, so we will have to re-purpose,” said Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates.

That may be hard to accept for those who see Alta Bates, which was founded in 1905, as a pillar of the community — a place where people are born and die, not to mention a major local employer.

“Cities feel like they’re not a real city without a hospital because there are all these civic ties that create a connection,” said Wanda Jones, co-founder of the New Century Healthcare Institute in San Francisco and an expert on hospital consolidation. “It’s people who are closest to it who often cannot grasp the external factors that make closure necessary.”