

# Baby strollers lead push to save Berkeley's Alta Bates hospital

Alta Bates' owner, Sutter Health, said it does not intend to close, but rather “repurpose” the Berkeley campus



Community members protest in front of Alta Bates Summit Medical Center on Sunday, Nov. 5, 2017, in Berkeley, Calif. Sutter Health plans to move acute care services from the Berkeley hospital to a new medical center in Oakland. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

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**BERKELEY** — About 150 people, many pushing strollers, rallied Sunday to protest the closing — or otherwise put, the repurposing — of Alta Bates Summit Medical Center.

“Save the Birthplace of the East Bay,” they chanted, invoking the hospital’s historic role as an area maternity center. Proponents of maintaining Alta Bates’ current level of service, which also includes an emergency room, have warned that something less, coupled with the 2015 closing of Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo, would reduce a swath of the East Bay from Crockett to Berkeley to a “health care desert.”

“(Alta Bates) is not only a hospital for Alameda County, it’s a hospital for the I-80 corridor, for the East Bay,” said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, speaking at the rally. “Both my son and daughter were born here as well, and we all have our personal stories about the importance of this hospital, why it’s important to save.”

Alta Bates’ owner, Sutter Health, announced plans about two years ago to consolidate services at its Summit Medical Center campus in Oakland, due to a financial shortfall and

seismic issues at Alta Bates. The company rejects the notion that it wants to close the Berkeley hospital, founded in 1905 by its namesake, nurse Alta Miner Bates.

“The Alta Bates campus is not closing,” Sutter Health said in a statement Monday, reaffirming a similar statement issued last week. “We are examining ways to repurpose the campus for medical services and/or support staff office space that would carry less of an impact on the neighborhood, while complying with the state’s 2030 seismic regulations.”

“The new, larger regional medical center in Oakland will be sized to meet the needs of all the patients currently seen across both the Alta Bates and Summit campuses, with a new, larger ER, new ICUs and surgery suites, a new Labor & Delivery, and all private patient rooms,” Sutter Health added.

The notion that fewer but larger regional emergency rooms can substitute for shuttered local ones has met with skepticism from the public as well as some officials. Current fears surrounding Sutter Health’s plans for Alta Bates echo those expressed when DMC closed two years ago, leaving just two emergency rooms between Vallejo and Oakland: at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Richmond, and Alta Bates in Berkeley.

“There will be greater transport time to emergency rooms,” Gioia said. “There will be greater waiting time ... There will be deaths — and I say that — my father was a high school teacher in Richmond, who at the age of 58 died of cardiac arrest, because he did not get care in time. We know that lives are saved when we have close access to care.”

Berkeley Mayor Jesse Arreguin expressed similar concerns.

“It’s criminal for Sutter to close not just the maternity and delivery services, but the only emergency room between Richmond and downtown Oakland,” Arreguin said. “And what that means is people’s lives are at risk. And for what reason? To make a few extra bucks. We cannot let them put people’s lives on the line for the sake of maximizing profits.

He suggested people call Summit Health CEO Chuck Prosper and tell him to keep Alta Bates open. “This is an issue of life and death,” Arreguin said.

Sutter, in its statement Monday, added that “In Berkeley we also plan to expand access to outpatient services, including doctors’ visits, surgery and cancer care centers, and urgent care clinics.”