

Wahiawa General Hospital Needs Aloha, Not A Corporate Takeover

Helping the struggling hospital with a modest annual subsidy makes good financial and moral sense.

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By Representative Marcus Oshiro

Thanks to thousands of supporters, loyal community leaders, and statewide news coverage, there is strong public consensus for helping Wahiawa General Hospital by providing \$3 million each of the next two years to subsidize operational costs the nonprofit hospital that serves about one-third of Oahu.

The public knows the importance of our emergency room, which treats more than 20,000 lives a year in central and North Shore Oahu, and its 100-bed skilled nursing facility for elderly, disabled and hospice patients. No one disputes the worthiness of giving \$2.5 million for charitable care services.

Keep in mind that every year more than \$80 million in state subsidies keeps our 13 neighbor island rural hospitals open. This year, Kaiser Permanente will receive more than \$30 million to run Maui, Kula and Lanai hospitals. These subsidies are investments of our tax dollars, and WGH deserves equal treatment.

A \$3 million annual state investment to support Wahiawa General Hospital would cost less than the two ambulances to cover the same area served by the hospital now.

Dr. James Ireland, former City and County of Honolulu director of Emergency Medical Services, reminds us that we should not have to repeat the horrible experience of Hawaii Medical Center closing in 2012 that caused a backlog in emergency room services and sent ambulances racing to find open wards at Queens, Tripler, Castle, Pali Momi and Wahiawa. Truthfully, real people and real families were affected.

If WGH weren't there, it would take two or three ambulances to cover the same area now served by the hospital and cost \$4 million to \$6 million annually. Talk about penny wise and pound foolish.

Can't the state afford \$3 million to help WGH? The answer is yes. The state ended 2015 with a surplus of more than \$800 million, and the same is forecast for 2016. The state also saves about \$50 million every year. And, understand this: \$3 million out of the \$14 billion state budget is a very small amount — about .0214 percent. This is a no-brainer. We would look foolish hoarding a cash surplus if WGH closed. Our friends and families would rightfully feel shame.

So, why are a few legislators forcing a \$5 million general obligation bond sale and buy-and-lease deal on WGH? Is having the High Technology Development Corporation take over WGH's skilled nursing facility and parking lots — an idea that was introduced but that failed to pass in the 2014 legislative session — necessary or appropriate? There's been no public or local discussion on this idea, and it is not the official position of the governor or the Legislature. The corporation has yet to even complete a feasibility study. Honestly, isn't this premature at best, suspicious at worse?

When I was chairman of the House Committee on Finance, we tackled billion-dollar deficits and prioritized public health spending with Govs. Lingle and Abercrombie. We provided emergency cash assistance for Hilo, Kau, Kona, Kohala, Kula, Lanai, Kauai Veterans, Samuel Mahelona and Leahi and Maluhia hospitals. We kept these communities protected and hospitals open. We overcame any partisan, regional, or factional division. As then, this is not time for petty politics.

Recently, a friend reminded me that how we resolve the WGH crisis will be a reflection of who we are as individuals and as a community. She bid me well, but her parting words haunted me, suggesting that if our "aloha spirit" was not a mere cliché, then, we must live it, in word and deed. Cleverly, she posed a moral litmus test for us.

Losing WGH would be catastrophic. Failure is not an option. But taxing WGH to sell its parking lots and skilled-nursing facility, in order to receive help, is like extorting an emergency patient to barter his arms and legs or sell her blood and bone in trade for medical care and attention. It would be unnecessary, cruel and a bloody mess. It would not be living aloha.

Instead, let us reaffirm ourselves. Reaffirm our aloha spirit. Helping WGH will prove Hawaii is still no ka oi — the best.