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Shrinking Laguna Honda

EDITORIAL

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IT'S TIME for a reassessment of the project to rebuild San Francisco's Laguna Honda Hospital.

City Controller Ed Harrington has laid out a compelling outline for a radical overhaul of the way the city's public-health system takes care of the elderly and disabled and those who may need extended care.

Harrington's recommendations, based on a study of the city's public-health system by a health-management consultant, include a proposal to replace Laguna Honda with smaller facilities rather than a new 1,200-bed facility. This is sensible, especially in light of the fact that cost overruns on the project would allow construction for only a 780-bed facility.

It's hardly a secret that a large number of patients at Laguna Honda do not need to be hospitalized and that the city could care for them more easily and cheaply in a community-care facility. Placing them all in one giant facility not only would cost the city untold millions -- the construction costs for each skilled-nursing bed at Laguna Honda has been estimated at \$525,000 -- but the idea contradicts modern health-care trends that favor smaller health-care centers.

Harrington's study found that more than 90 percent of all skilled-nursing facilities in the nation have fewer than 200 beds.

City officials need to resist pressure from organized labor, which is insisting that Laguna Honda be rebuilt as a 1,200-bed facility. Harrington's report, which calls for building three smaller health-care centers on the site, makes more sense and is more cost effective.

In 1999, we supported and voters approved a bond measure to rebuild Laguna Honda. At the time, we concluded there was "no immediate alternative" to rebuilding a facility that was unsafe and outdated -- and facing the prospect of a federal shutdown. With costs now soaring -- and serious questions persisting about whether the large facility near Twin Peaks fits the needs of the city's older population -- it's become clear that San Francisco can save money and improve its health-care offerings at the same time.

The project needs a new direction.

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