

## **Covina planning commission to decide fate of psych hospital**

By Jennifer McLain, Staff Writer  
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COVINA - A psychiatric hospital in a residential neighborhood could nearly triple in size if its expansion proposal gets city approval tonight. Officials at Aurora Charter Oak Hospital, 1161 East Covina Blvd., are proposing expanding the facility to house another 39 beds. Currently, it holds 92 beds.

"If they can't handle the 100 patients they have now, why would we want to see another 40 patients in there?" said Wayne Ball, whose home sits next to the hospital's property.

Tonight's meeting marks the second time in two months the planning commission will discuss the expansion. The plan includes the construction of a 14,752-square-foot facility. The meeting is scheduled to begin at 7:30 p.m. at City Hall.

On Dec. 11, the planning commission took no action as a way to allow neighbors, planning commissioners and hospital officials more time to learn about the proposal.

"This is one of those types of facilities that no one wants to live next to," said Covina Councilman John King. "I'm really hopeful that the hospital and the neighbors can come together and reach an agreement."

City officials are predicting a large turnout at tonight's meeting. So far, residents have fought the expansion by distributing fliers opposing the hospital. They also met with elected leaders, and collected 400 signatures on a petition taken aim at the hospital.

Residents had stories about patients escaping, asking them for rides and shouting out profanities from the hospital's property. Residents also said that the concrete wall separating their homes from the hospital's property is too short.

Staci Skelly, the hospital's business development director, said the hospital has worked hard to appease residents' concerns.

"We have agreed to continue to work with the police department, and are trying to address the security concerns," Skelly said.

Covina police officials said they responded to the hospital 154 times in 2006, 177 times in 2007, Officials project a total of 190 calls for service in 2008.

The hospital provides psychiatric and drug abuse recovery support. Nearly half of the patients are there voluntarily, while the others are there on mandatory lockdowns.

"I wish that everybody could see and be able to experience what we provide," Skelly said. "I'm proud of the people and families we've helped over the years."

Last Wednesday, a group of residents met with representatives from the offices of several elected leaders, including Board of Equalization Chairwoman Judy Chu, Sen. Gloria Romero and Assemblyman Ed Hernandez.

"There are several questions the Assemblyman has before he makes a determination," said Walter Hughes, spokesman for Hernandez. Among the concerns are the level of security and the facility's proximity to an elementary school.

Cedargrove Elementary School is separated from the hospital by a chain-link fence. Cedargrove Principal Debra Tarbox said she has spoken with many parents concerned about the proposed expansion.

"Ideally, we would prefer if they don't expand, because our No. 1 priority is the safety of our students," Tarbox said. "But understanding that they have a right to be there, we at least want 24-hour armed security."

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