

Opinion: Tall order: Measure B and Cottage Hospital

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Is Cottage Hospital important to your family? For almost everyone in Santa Barbara, the answer is yes.

Cottage Hospital is being rebuilt and expanded to better serve our community. A portion of the old hospital will be demolished and rebuilt, and new buildings are being added. The new hospital is designed to provide excellent medical care to Santa Barbara for generations to come.

The "old" portion of Cottage Hospital at the corner of Pueblo and Bath streets will remain; it is 72 feet tall. The proposed new hospital being built is 60 feet tall and includes three 3-story in-patient pavilions.

Now, here comes the big surprise: Cottage Hospital will be subject to the proposed 45-foot height limit in "Measure B" on November's ballot. Measure B would change the City Charter's existing 60-foot height limit and reduce it to 40 feet in the downtown area and 45 feet in other apartment and commercial areas of the city. Cottage Hospital is in a part of the city subject to the proposed 45-foot height limit. If Measure B had been in effect when Cottage Hospital's permits were issued, the hospital could not have been built as planned. The Charter would have required it to be reduced in height by 25 percent.

The people who wrote Measure B did not include a "grandfather provision." A "grandfather provision" is usually included in new building rules because we try to be fair to property owners and businesses who built under the old rules or who have spent a lot of money on plans for a new building. Longtime residents recall the 1989 Charter amendment (Measure E) that placed strict limits on new commercial development. Concerned about fairness, the city took care to include a grandfather provision.

What does the flaw in Measure B mean for the future of Cottage Hospital?

First, if any building at Cottage Hospital over 45 feet tall is destroyed in a catastrophe, it cannot be rebuilt to its former height. It would have to be rebuilt at 45 feet. That knocks off one floor, allowing only a two-story replacement building. We do not know what medical services will have to be eliminated due to this 25 percent reduction.

Second, should Cottage Hospital need to build the fourth patient pavilion shown in its long range plan, it will not be able to build to the same height as the rest of the facility. New buildings will be limited to 45 feet.

The problem Measure B creates is not limited to Cottage Hospital. The new 40-foot downtown height limit will affect dozens of existing buildings in the downtown area -- many of which are our most beloved architectural gems. Buildings like the Arlington Theatre, Trinity Church, the Lobero Theatre, the Art Museum, the News-Press building, the Balboa Building, Hotel Santa Barbara and the headquarters for Santa Barbara Bank & Trust. If you want to see a complete list, visit the "No on Measure B" page on Facebook.

The people who wrote Measure B admit that it does not include a grandfather clause. So what do they say when asked about the Cottage Hospital problem?

Here's their response: If Cottage Hospital needs to be rebuilt, the city just needs to draft another Charter amendment, call a new election and get voter approval. This sounds difficult, expensive and time-consuming -- and is not a sensible way to deal with our city's pressing medical care needs. Ballot-box planning is not good planning.

Measure B's supporters have a second answer: If Cottage Hospital is only 65 percent destroyed, it can be rebuilt. In other words, they are keeping their fingers crossed that a catastrophe does not cause total destruction. A strange hope indeed.

Do the authors of Measure B intend to hurt Cottage Hospital? No. But, the mistake they made in drafting Measure B could hurt this essential community institution and so many of our beloved buildings. They are asking the voters of the City to gamble with the future of Cottage Hospital. Does that make sense to you?

It is clear that Measure B is badly flawed. We can and should do better.

We oppose Measure B. Please join us.

Note: The writers say Cottage Hospital officials have confirmed the accuracy of the technical statements made above. However, the statements made above are those of the undersigned and do not necessarily represent the views of Cottage Health System, its board of directors, administration or medical staff.

The authors are former members of the Cottage Hospital board of directors.

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