

UCSD, ECRMC join forces; 90-day assessment next

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A sign shows direction to the emergency room at El Centro Regional Medical Center.
JOSELITO VILLERO FILE PHOTO

Over the next 90 days, UCSD officials will study every aspect of El Centro Regional Medical Center before coming back with concrete details on what services the university will provide as it manages the city-owned hospital.

The El Centro City Council voted 5-0 Tuesday night to enter into a “master management agreement” with University of California San Diego Health System and School of Medicine. During an earlier joint meeting of the city and the ECRMC board, the board recommended unanimously to go forward with the agreement as well.

In essence the city has approved a “shell” of a management agreement, as City Councilwoman Sedalia Sanders described the action, to be filled in with details in 90 days after university officials finish their assessment of the operations.

“I think that we need someone with the expertise and depth of knowledge, depth of support, depth of staff that the university has, and I have every reason to believe that the university will provide that,” said Dr. Charles Humphrey, president of the ECRMC Board of Trustees.

Ultimately the partnership with UCSD Health is being lauded as a major step forward for local health care because of what will likely be access to specialists from UCSD’s ranks and its quality-control systems once the assessment is done and services are detailed.

Valley residents have long had to travel to areas outside the county — specifically the often costly and lengthy trip to San Diego for low-income residents and seniors — to

seek out specialists not in the Valley. Imperial County suffers from a shortage of not only specialists but in the number of general physicians as well.

Humphrey said this initial period with UCSD can be best described as a consulting period, but he wants to see that lead to a strong management period. “I would hope the management agreement as they evolve and the assessment is done, that the next management agreement would be much more robust,” he said.

UCSD Health System Chief Executive Officer Paul Viviano presented to the hospital board and city in open session of their joint meeting and met with the council behind closed doors, Humphrey said.

As a result, discussion was nearly nonexistent at Tuesday night’s City Council meeting, with the vote tally taken and the next order of business taken up.

Viviano did talk about “branding,” Humphrey said, meaning the UCSD name would be attached to the hospital and services, which in Humphrey’s mind means that the quality and depth of care would follow as not to jeopardize the university’s reputation.

The terms of the “master management agreement” is for five years, but according to Humphrey there seems to be the ability to terminate at any time.

Although UCSD Health will be the overall manager of the hospital, the ECRMC Board of Trustees will remain in place, as will the City Council’s current responsibilities, according to the agreement. UCSD’s “senior leadership” will have a seat at the table in all meetings.

Humphrey said that is not uncommon. Sharp Healthcare in San Diego, for instance, maintains individual governing boards at its hospitals while Sharp management has a voice in all meetings.

ECRMC administration will also remain in place, although the chief executive officer of ECRMC will report to both the local hospital board and UCSD upper administration. Key ECRMC executives will report to the local CEO and their management counterparts at UCSD, according to the agreement.

That structure seems cumbersome to Humphrey, but he imagines once the 90-day period is up those types of dual-reporting roles will be better-defined.

All hospital staff is to remain employees of ECRMC, not UCSD, the agreement outlines.

Humphrey believes the 90-day “operations assessment” began informally a few weeks ago. The assessment of the hospital will look into everything from staffing and cost structures, to processes and infrastructure, in order to determine the “specific management services to be provided,” according to the management agreement.

Late last year UCSD executed its first local agreement with Imperial Valley Family Care Medical Group, which represents 25 physicians, nurse practitioners and assistants and reportedly serves 30,000 local residents.

Group President Dr. Vachas Palakodeti said UCSD’s systems and measurement of quality is already moving forward with the group through auditing and comparing the group’s quality control measures with that of UCSD’s. Ultimately, Palakodeti said, his group and other groups UCSD is attempting to partner with is offering to move offices, physicians’ groups and hospitals onto its massive electronic records system “to coordinate across systems” and provide Imperial Valley residents with top-notch access and services.