

# Until Laguna Honda Promises Are Kept, Just Say “No” to Bond Measures



Planning to rebuild Laguna Honda Hospital and Rehabilitation Center (LHH) began in 1980. After 19 years of studies, lengthy community debate, and development of an Institutional Master Plan and a four-volume Facility Master Plan that received approval of the Department of Public Health and the Planning Department, voters were asked to approve a vaguely-worded bond measure claiming LHH would be rebuilt as a healthcare facility or facilities.

In November 1999, 73% of voters — believing the Health Commission, Mayor, and Board of Supervisors — approved the \$299 million bond measure to rebuild LHH to safely care for poor, elderly, and physically disabled San Franciscans. The bonds were for healthcare, not housing.

Now 26 years into the LHH planning process (longer than planning the Bay Bridge rebuild), and seven years after voters were led to believe from paid arguments in the 1999 voter guide that LHH would be built with 1,200 skilled nursing beds plus an additional 140 “assisted living” beds, construction is underway on four of the five buildings project architects have been paid \$30 million to design in the intervening seven years. The fifth building, designed to contain 420 skilled nursing beds, may be scrapped entirely, wasting substantial architectural fees, despite the fact that departments at LHH had initially signed off on floor plans for all five buildings as early as October 2001. Since 2001, multiple alterations to the floor plans, known as “change orders,” have occurred repeatedly. Now, plans for an entire building may be scrapped, although construction is well underway.

Unexpectedly — just three months after Prop. D on the June 2006 ballot to preserve the safety of LHH’s skilled nursing care for elderly and disabled San Franciscans was defeated, in part, by the deception of our City officials — a new plan has suddenly emerged to spend \$562,800 to study and develop a “Senior Housing Plan” for the LHH campus, possibly including fully-independent senior housing apartments. The “study” does not fund architectural fees that will be required to design actual housing; the study only funds conceptual schematics, not working floor plans. And at the eleventh hour, consultants with experience in integrating senior housing projects with commercial and retail projects have suddenly been hired to help design a new plan for housing on the LHH campus. **Will a commercial and retail land grab replace skilled nursing beds at LHH?**

Although San Francisco desperately needs housing projects of all types, the crisis of an insufficient number of skilled nursing beds, particularly for medically indigent San Franciscans relying on Medi-Cal, is even more desperate.

City officials have long known San Francisco has lost 300 skilled nursing beds since 1992 due to nursing home closures. The Health Department projected in 1998 the City would be short 2,380 skilled beds by the year 2020 even if all 1,200 beds at LHH were rebuilt. Between a disputed number of beds that accept Medi-Cal patients and current proposals to eliminate 420 of LHH’s skilled nursing beds by not constructing the fifth building, the City may end up 3,767 skilled nursing beds short just 14 years from now in 2020. When, not if, disaster strikes San Francisco, we’re going to need those 420 nursing beds ... and more!

The City’s long-term care ombudsman has reported that between 1992 and 2004, 1,693 new assisted living units were built, although most are out of reach of Medi-Cal patients. Since 2005, many more assisted living and supportive housing beds have also been built. So why are we cutting skilled nursing beds at LHH to build even more senior housing apartments?

San Francisco has a checkered history mispending bond money. The City Hall earthquake bonds were also intended to fix the War Memorial building, but that didn’t happen. The Mental Health Rehabilitation Facility bond financing built 147 psychiatric beds, but now only 47 beds are used for that purpose. Housing and school bonds have not been spent as promised.

Meanwhile, senior and disabled San Franciscans are being shipped to out-of-county nursing facilities away from their homes and families, and City officials are now authoring documents describing the LHH replacement project as first building housing and only secondarily as building a healthcare facility. We may end up with fully-independent senior apartments and retail establishments at LHH, sacrificing sorely-needed skilled nursing beds. That’s not what voters were promised in 1999.

We must not abandon senior and disabled San Franciscans. Selling us LHH as a safety-net for “Old Friends,” then changing LHH’s mission from a medical model to a new so-called “social-residential” model for housing, is another injustice.

Until the City builds LHH’s 1,200 skilled nursing beds as promised, and until we are absolutely certain that City officials will use bond financing on what we vote for, voters should reject all future bond measures. Voters are now being asked to approve \$500 million in school bonds, despite reduced school enrollment as families flee San Francisco’s high cost of living. To send a message to City officials that they must first honor bond promises made in 1999, **please vote “No” on the school bond measure on November 7**. If the City really wants the school bond measure passed this fall, and the San Francisco General Hospital bond measure passed in 2008, they’ll deliver on their 1999 promises for use of the Laguna Honda bond measure **first**. After all, a first promise actually **kept** helps make subsequent promises believable.

— Sister Miriam Walsh, Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart  
Laguna Honda Pastoral Care Director for 25 years

