

I'VE DONE MY HOMEWORK:
THE PROPOSED HEALING CENTER WILL BE A BIG PLUS FOR KINGSBURG
By Steve Safarjian¹

When I learned about the plan to reopen the vacant Kingsburg Hospital as a mental health facility, I took a lot of interest. I didn't know much about such facilities or how they work.

I do know is that Kingsburg is a special community needs new, good jobs. Taxpayers are paying good money to prop up an empty hospital building. We deserve a better equation – one that generates jobs, taxes, and help for a lot of people in Kingsburg and surrounding Fresno County communities.

I thought it was important to do some homework. I started talking to the people at Crestwood and Fresno County who are proposing the project. Crestwood is a Sacramento company that provides mental health care for many California counties. I read their website and carefully studied their materials.

I don't claim any expertise on mental health, but I have friends and family members who have dealt with issues like bipolar disorder or depression. I know many people in Kingsburg whose lives have been turned upside down by mental health problems, especially when they have to travel hundreds of miles for treatment.

It wasn't clear how real the need might be in Kingsburg. In talking with Fresno County's behavioral health experts, and actually checking records at one local hospital, it became clear that lots of people in Kingsburg and nearby towns would need such services.

Then I did something a bit out of the ordinary. Without telling my friends in Kingsburg, and giving the Crestwood people just 30 minutes' notice, I asked to tour the Crestwood facility in Pleasant Hill, in Contra Costa County. I had to satisfy my own curiosity about how a facility might fit into Kingsburg and in close proximity to schools, so I made the 3-hour drive and staged my "surprise" visit.

What I found was a pretty nondescript facility right in the middle of a residential community, with, schools, and a Safeway and other stores not far away. Inside, it reminded me of a hospital floor, nursing home, or any "typical" healthcare facility. People were calm and going about their business. The only disruption seemed to be coming from a remodeling project in one part of the building. The staff was professional and there seemed to be plenty of them working with the patients.

I toured the community and literally stopped people on the street to ask them about the Crestwood facility. Many people in Pleasant Hill opposed this center years ago, so I thought I'd get an earful. Honestly, most of the people I talked to didn't even know the place was there and only a few recalled the controversy. They couldn't recall any incidents or problems. The Safeway manager told me he had been concerned about who might be living there – he's had no problems and actually hired one of the residents to work for him!

I visited a liquor store a couple of blocks away. Yes, the manager told me, he initially worried about the facility. The Crestwood manager paid him a visit, gave him her card, and told him to

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call her if there was ever a problem. Five years later, the card is still taped above his cash register – it's never been used.

I've chosen to give back to the community in many ways, but I'm especially dedicated to my work on the Economic Committee. I'm aware of how hard it is to attract and keep businesses and jobs, especially with the Del Monte and other closings so fresh on our minds.

From an economic perspective, the Healing Center will be good for Kingsburg. It takes the vacant hospital building, invests \$2 million from Crestwood and reopens as a healthcare facility – what it was built for in the first place. It creates construction jobs immediately and more than 50 permanent jobs in healthcare, which is a growing industry.

But it's not just about the jobs or the economics. It's also about helping our neighbors. Kingsburg is a caring community. We value families, faith, and tradition. I can't think of a better way to display Kingsburg's best character than by getting behind this project.

If you do your homework, as I have, I think you'll agree.

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