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Land of Troubled Inglewood Abortion Clinic for Sale

March 13, 1988 | SEBASTIAN ROTELLA | Times Staff Writer

Representatives of a busy Inglewood abortion clinic that surrendered its hospital license last month after being shut down for health code violations are offering to sell the property for \$2.5 million.

The former Inglewood Women's Hospital reopened and resumed doing abortions as the West Coast Women's Medical Group shortly after health officials closed it Feb. 10. County, state and federal health officials cracked down on the state's busiest abortion facility beginning in November because of continuing violations of hospital regulations.

Other Hospitals Approached

At the same time that officials at the former hospital have been denouncing efforts to shut it down, they have been quietly trying to sell the medical buildings and surrounding land. In the past month, they have approached other hospitals in the city and retained a real estate firm to market the property as a site for a medical facility or the land for multiple-unit housing.

Officials at both major hospitals in Inglewood confirmed this week that they had been approached about buying the property.

Administrators of the abortion facility, including its owner, Dr. Morton Barke, could not be reached for comment.

Centinela Medical Center officials met with representatives for Barke but they could not agree on a price, said Centinela spokesman Ron Yukelson.

Daniel Freeman Hospital spokesman Jeff Murkow said representatives for Barke contacted Freeman Hospital administrators more than four weeks ago and set up a meeting.

"It was an exploratory conversation" about selling the property, Murkow said. He said Freeman is not interested.

Joseph White, a broker for Merrill Lynch Industrial Properties in Santa Monica, said the abortion business itself is not for sale, only the real estate. The property at 426 E. 99th St. has 12,250 square feet of office space on a 36,000-square-foot lot, according to Inglewood city records.

The facility--which now houses the medical group specializing in abortions--went on the market "about the time (the hospital's) troubles

began" in February, White said.

Before the crackdown, the 28-bed hospital performed nearly 1,000 abortions a month in allegedly unsanitary and negligent conditions. Several abortion-related deaths at the facility have spurred lawsuits and an investigation by the Los Angeles County district attorney's office.

A newspaper classified advertisement that listed the property for sale appeared as early as Feb. 7, three days before health officials closed the hospital and two days before the Inglewood City Council granted a rezoning request to Barke.

During the previous three months of controversy over conditions at the hospital, Barke and other hospital officials appeared at several council meetings to obtain the change from an R-3 (multiple family) zone to an R-M (multiple family or medical) zone, which allows additional parking.

Reason for Opposing Vote

Inglewood Councilwoman Ann Wilk was the only council member to vote against the rezoning. She said she would not vote for the hospital's request, even on a zoning issue, because she could not support a facility that was giving the city a bad name.

Mayor Edward Vincent and Sen. Diane Watson (D-Los Angeles) defended the hospital before its shutdown, saying violations had been corrected. Both Vincent and Watson have received considerable campaign contributions from Barke and the facility over the past few years. In 1986 and 1987, Vincent received \$4,200 and Watson received \$5,800, according to campaign contribution records.

Vincent said Friday that he was surprised at the news that the property was for sale because Barke had expressed interest in acquiring property elsewhere in the city. He also said that despite having received contributions from Barke, he has had little contact with Barke and has never been inside the hospital.

In an interview this week, Councilwoman Wilk said of the abortion clinic: "I'm just glad that they're going, if they're going. The sooner, the better. It was a bad reflection on the city."

Vincent said: "If in fact they are leaving, it may be for the best."

Assistant City Manager Lou Pond said city officials had not known the hospital property was for sale. But both Vincent and Pond said that information would not have affected the staff recommendation on the rezoning request.

"The zoning goes with the property," Pond said. "It's the use we're concerned about, not the owner. . . . The rezoning accommodates growth around our major medical facilities while creating safeguards that keep growth compatible with surrounding residential areas."

The owner of a home near the abortion facility said Merrill Lynch representatives had offered to buy his home and had told him the site was being considered for multiple-unit housing.

A classified advertisement in The Times last week describes the property as a 28-bed hospital/medical facility with administrative offices, zoned for medical or multiple family purposes. It lists the location as "Westside" and a price of \$2.5 million.

White said the asking price had been brought down from an original \$3.5 million and that there have been several inquiries.

"If I were pitching it to you, I would talk in terms of a convalescent or a psychiatric hospital rather than a general hospital," White said. "Twenty-eight beds are hardly enough to make it a legitimate general hospital."

City and hospital officials speculated that Barke has decided to sell because business has been affected by negative publicity and the loss of the hospital license, which deprived the facility of Medicare benefits and forced layoffs of 25 workers.

The clinic may no longer keep patients overnight or bill Medi-Cal for hospital care.