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## County Judge, Veronica Escobar

### ▶▶ Emotional arguments for a new children's hospital

By Mike Mrkvicka, El Paso Inc.  
Proponents of constructing a children's hospital at Thomason Hospital are aiming for the hearts, not necessarily the minds, of voters in an upcoming bond election.

Supporters filled the El Paso County Commissioner's Court chambers last week to offer their views. They witnessed the commissioner's unanimous passage of a resolution to place a \$120 million hospital bond issue on the Nov. 6 ballot.

Thomason administrators, who have laid the groundwork for a children's hospital, presented all the facts and figures showing that the proposed hospital is desperately needed in El Paso, that it will be established as a nonprofit enterprise separate from Thomason, and that it will be financially successful.

But the real show stoppers were those who brought up images of ailing children during the public comment phase of the meeting.

"I know not everybody is going to be gung ho for this project. I can understand. But remember, we are doing this for the kids," said Dr. Carlos Gutierrez, a pediatrician who serves on the Thomason board.

"This is a vision for the children of El Paso," added Ron Acton, who chairs the board.

Far more compelling were statements by parents like Angie Martinez. Seven years ago, she couldn't find the specialists in El Paso who could treat her newborn, Julia. The infant suffered congenital breathing and heart defects.

"The surgeon told me it was too complicated, too many things wrong with Julia. He told me I needed to go somewhere else," Martinez said.

She was forced to find surgeons in Dallas.

"It was very expensive. Very trying. Very hard on us as parents. Very hard on Julia traveling back and forth," Martinez said.

For four months, the family made weekly flights to Dallas for Julia's treatment. "We would fly there every Tuesday. I hated Tuesdays," she said.

And now it looks like it all might happen again. Doctors say Julia may have to undergo open-heart surgery within the next six years.

That's why the children's hospital in El Paso is such a burning issue for Martinez. Instead of repeating all those flights to Dallas, Angie could have her daughter treated in her hometown.

### Not all happy

Of the dozens of citizens who spoke at the Commissioner's Court meeting Thursday, none opposed the children's hospital.

That's not because there is no opposition. John Harris, CEO of the Sierra Providence Health Network, for one, has said the children's hospital at Thomason will duplicate services already provided at Providence's 144-bed Children's Hospital. He believes the study commissioned by Thomason administrators to determine the feasibility of the hospital is "severely flawed," and that the hospital would likely become a drain on county finances.

Jim Valenti, CEO of the El Paso County Hospital District, said Harris's absence at the County Commissioner's meeting did not surprise him.

"If I were in his shoes, it would be very difficult to come here and try to tell patients and their families that a children's hospital is not needed," Valenti said after the meeting.

Valenti said he was touched by Angie Martinez's story. She works as the administrator of anesthesiology at Texas Tech and "we know each other professionally but I don't know her personally. I never knew her story. I hugged her today. Her story is unbelievable," he said.

He noted that Julia's upcoming surgery "is very doable in El Paso" once the children's hospital comes on line.

"That's the excitement: Providing services to the community that we don't have today," Valenti said.

Dr. Robert Suskind, founding dean of the Texas Tech El Paso School of Medicine, agreed that the children's hospital will have the subspecialists to treat Angie's daughter, including a cardio-vascular surgery program, a pediatric neurosurgeon, a pediatric urologist, an orthopedic surgeon and a geneticist.

"For all these years, there has never been an opportunity like this to really attract pediatric subspecialists to this community," Suskind said.

### Personal plea

Martinez's daughter, Julia Rodriguez, was born with a chromosomal deficiency that left her with a



County Judge  
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