

KEEPING THE PEACE FOR THE LARGER COMMUNITY



There was a palpable strain between Berkeley's Alta Bates Medical Center and its residential neighbors by the time Fern Tiger Associates was asked to assist the hospital with community relations. Already mistrustful and angry about traffic and noise, neighbors opposed ABMC's plan to increase the number of maternity rooms, and the city had banned work on the construction. In 1995, FTA agreed to work with the hospital to help negotiate the expansion, on the condition that Alta Bates pursue long-term strategies to improve communication with the community, where it had been based for nearly 90 years.

FTA recognized that the hospital could help fulfill a number of community needs if it could build relationships with residents. Taking into consideration the specific needs of various parties affected by this decision, FTA worked to shape a dialogue with the greater Berkeley community.

At the same time, the firm helped the hospital establish a number of initiatives intended to be inclusive of and sensitive to nearby residents: weekly tours of the hospital, community meetings, and a hotline where residents could call in any and all complaints. While the efforts never completely mended relations between the hospital and its neighbors, FTA successfully negotiated an eleventh-hour compromise with the city that led to the construction of a top-notch maternity service hospital, including one of the best neonatal intensive care units in California.

*The hotline where neighbors of the hospital could call with complaints rang in the FTA office. No matter how seemingly small the complaint, FTA or a hospital staff member would work to address it – picking up a medical shoe cover that had blown onto a resident's lawn, hiring traffic and sound engineers to monitor car flow and noise levels, working to minimize car alarms going off in the garage, monitoring employee car pool usage, and discouraging employees from parking in the neighborhood. Still, pleasing everyone was not possible: one caller demanded that ambulances silence their sirens; another wanted double-paned windows for his apartment.*

*Founded by nurse Alta Alice Miner Bates as an eight-bed hospital for new mothers, the nearly century-old ALTA BATES MEDICAL CENTER is now part of the Sutter Health Network which includes 23 hospitals and healthcare facilities.*