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## NEW DEMOCRACY? SOUTH COUNTY EXPERIMENT MAY BECOME MODEL FOR FUTURE

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Southern Sonoma County residents are currently participating in what pollster Richard Hertz calls a "bleeding-edge experiment" in democracy.

Hertz is working with the Petaluma Health Care District on what might be one of the first large-scale community online polls.

Here's how it works: 38,000 postcards have been sent to households in an area that stretches from Cotati to the Marin border. On the card is a Web address, [www.talkingpolls.com/go/phcd](http://www.talkingpolls.com/go/phcd), which takes responders to the survey. People without Internet access can call 773-3863 and get a paper copy of the poll.

People who respond online are greeted with a short video (in English or Spanish) explaining the purpose of the survey. They then respond to a series of questions about health care in general, about local availability of services and about Petaluma Valley Hospital.

The survey is cool for three reasons:

\* It could become a model for other local governments as they struggle to reach residents who are increasingly disengaged from the community.

\* It's fun and convenient. As opposed to phone surveys, people can respond on their own time and at their own speed. Unlike paper surveys, they simply have to press a button to "mail" it.

\* The responses will provide the district with critical information as it goes forward. The district is approaching the mid-point of a long term contract with St. Joseph Health Systems (the owners of Memorial Hospital) to operate Petaluma Valley Hospital. Input from local consumers will help determine whether the contract has been successful.

Even people who've never stepped inside the hospital are encouraged to answer the survey. The district wants to know what health care problems residents are facing. (Is it difficult to find a doctor? Are people struggling to pay for prescription drugs?) These will be important considerations for the district as it plans for the future.

So, if you live in the health care district, don't throw away that blue and white postcard. And if

you live elsewhere in the county, take note of what's happening in Petaluma and the surrounding areas -- this new model of democracy could be coming your way soon.

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