

Medical complex planned at PRH; Facility designed to attract new doctors to the city

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If you build a new medical centre, doctors will come. This is the idea behind the Upper Ottawa Valley Health Centre, a new medical complex being constructed on the grounds of the Pembroke Regional Hospital.

The announcement of the new \$15-million medical building that will house doctors' offices, some surgical suites and space for visiting physicians, was made Monday afternoon by a new community health organization that was itself unveiled at the same community meeting. The organization, called the West Champlain Healthy Community Corporation, is made of a number of well-known citizens of the Ottawa Valley including representatives from Pembroke, Petawawa, Lake Clear and Whitewater Region.

The final surprise the committee pulled out of its hat was that the financing for the unique and innovative project will come from parking revenues at the Pembroke Regional Hospital.

"This is a community-based organization working to help the community to overcome health-care challenges within the community," said Wayne Gorman, treasurer of the corporation.

The board of the corporation has evolved from a founding group whose vision was endorsed by the board of the Pembroke Regional Hospital who planted the seed for such an organization. The corporation is a non-profit charitable organization.

The new health centre will be located on land owned by the Grey Sisters. Essentially it will be constructed in the front parking lot of the Pembroke Regional Hospital along Mackay Street.

Shovels could break ground for the new centre by April.

According to Mr. Gorman, the centre will have capacity to host a variety of health and wellness services as well as providing much-needed space for new physicians, accommodation for visiting physicians, specialists, students and residents.

Mr. Gorman said there will be no funding required from the provincial government, community donations or other revenue sources as construction of the five-storey structure will be paid for by parking revenue at the hospital.

The final operation of the health centre will be financed by those who will rent or lease space in the facility.

Construction and design of the building accounts for roughly \$8 million of the \$15-million total bill. The other \$7 million is going into "fitting up" the building with equipment.

According to Mr. Gorman, the new centre could be open in less than two years. He estimated that if the same process went through government channels, it would take between 10 and 20 years.

Thanks to a low-interest loan of \$2.5 million from the Grey Sisters, the organization was able to turn to the financial sector and secure a 27-year, reasonable-rate mortgage for the building.

Mr. Gorman said the group was conscious of the financial burden that had already been placed on the community to help pay for renovations and equipment at the hospital like the CT scanner and the new birthing suites.

Therefore, it wanted an option where it would not have to turn to the community for donations and one where it wouldn't have to spend a decade cutting through government red tape.

He said the government will eventually mandate paid parking in order to help drive health-care costs down by having the parking revenue directed into hospital budgets. By acting now, the group was able to implement paid parking and direct the revenue into paying for the health centre building.

It is hoped that the hospital will see a financial benefit as primary care for orphaned patients currently going through its emergency room will be directed into the health centre where services can be offered at a lower cost to the health-care system.

Board chairman Herb Shaw said the organization would like to have come forward earlier to explain why the hospital was implementing paid parking but circumstances beyond its control precluded the explanation from coming forward until now.

"We hope the community will keep an open mind and recognize the benefits," Mr. Shaw said.

Mr. Gorman emphasized that the Ministry of Health will still be providing health care at the facility.

The West Champlain Healthy Community Corporation is only facilitating health-care improvements by providing the space. It is not providing the care.

Reaction to the announcement seemed to be universally favourable.

Hospital president and CEO Pierre Noel said this approach was cutting new health-care ground and the announcement was like a dream come true.

"Unless we, as a community, take a risk, which is something we haven't had to do in the past, we won't succeed," he said. "I'm absolutely in support of this. This is something the hospital couldn't do on our own."

The hospital remains at arm's length from the new centre.

Debbie Robinson, chairwoman of the Upper Ottawa Valley Medical Recruitment Committee, said she accepted her position as chairwoman because she is a strong believer in communities helping themselves in relation to health care, rather than waiting for the government to come to the rescue.

"Just today I had a phone call from a woman desperate to have a physician help her to control her pain. When you have complete strangers calling and sharing their most intimate medical details with you because they are afraid and have no place to turn, you can't help but be moved," said Ms. Robinson. "Today's announcement from the newly formed West Champlain Healthy Community Corporation, offers tangible hope to people like this frightened woman in our community."

She said the centre's state-of-the-art approach to health care will be invaluable in helping recruit doctors as it will set this area apart from others in the province.

"I am determined to have the UOV recruitment committee work alongside the board of the health centre to aid in staffing this facility. The members of the board have given this community a magnificent gift and it has my unconditional support," she said.

People who have been trying to recruit physicians to the area have heard for years that today's physicians generally do not want to open their own private practices.

Today's medical graduate does not want the hassle of starting and running their own business with its associated startup costs and overhead. Instead, they prefer what is called a "turnkey" operation where the doctor simply shows up, turns the key and begins practice. The Upper Ottawa Valley Medical Recruitment Committee's professional recruiter Terri Jones was very excited by the announcement of the centre as she sees it as providing such a space to new doctors.

"We've been lacking options to provide to doctors looking to come here. This is fantastic. I'm so excited. This is a dream come true," she said.

While she is concentrating her recruitment efforts right now on this year's group of graduating physicians, she does stay in touch with students that have a few years of medical school left and will be graduating around the time the centre opens.

"I will be totally promoting this," she said.

Pembroke Regional Hospital board chairwoman Barbara Schoof said the original idea came out of a strategic planning session by the board a few years ago.

She said the board realized it had to focus its efforts into operating room upgrades as the hospital's current surgical suites were from the 1950s. However, with the recent \$46-million expansion at the hospital, it was unlikely that the PRH was at the top of the government's list for extra money.

"Traditional routes could have taken us 10, 12 even 20 years," she said. "This is amazing."

The new building will be five storeys and about 50,000 square feet. The top floor will likely house space for medical residents, students, professors and visiting specialists. The fourth floor is intended to feature four operating suites that the Pembroke Regional Hospital will take over to replace its aging suites.

The third floor is described as being mechanical, administrative and academic space. The second or ground floor will have consultation and examination rooms.

The bottom floor, which is partially in ground, will include a fitness centre, massage therapy and possibly some diagnostic procedures.

The members of the West Champlain Healthy Community Corporation are Herb Shaw, chairman, Fred Blackstein, vice-chairman, Wayne Gorman (treasurer), Col. David Erickson, Brian Leach, Dr. Scott Murray, Mary Hill and Jeffrey Weatherill, chief administrative officer.

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