

Reaching new heights in healthcare

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Humphrey Cancer Center intends to expand in Monticello

By Bobby Hart

The Monticello-Big Lake Community Hospital (MBLCH) took another sizeable step in the direction of becoming a regional-based facility at the board meeting last Thursday, when chair Bruce Hamond announced that the hospital, in conjunction with North Memorial, was completing a feasibility study to build a new Humphrey Cancer Center in Monticello.

The cancer center, which is owned by North Memorial, would be built into the new Monticello Clinic Medical Office Building—a project undertaken by MBLCH, Monticello Clinic and North Memorial, that is scheduled to break ground this spring and open in 2008.

The cancer center is still in the planning phase. Contracts, costs and coordinates associated with the new addition still need to be finalized. However, Chief Executive Officer Barb Schwientek and Chief Operations Officer Lynn Olson both indicated that the new cancer center is all but a done deal.

"It's pretty much a go," Schwientek said.

"It is the intent to move forward," Olson said. "The building will be planned as if it will happen."

Venture continues forward

North Memorial originally indicated it was interested in leasing approximately 10,000 square feet of the 60,000-square-foot, two-story medical office building, which will be located west of the hospital's west wing entrance.

MBLCH has a prior working relationship with North Memorial through a number of small ventures, Schwientek said.

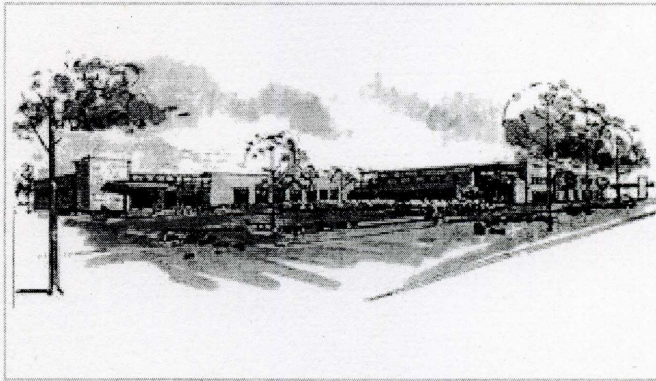
North Memorial has provided more than 50 years of service to communities in the northwest metro and currently has 5,000 employees.

Among the communities in the northwest metro that North Memorial serves, Monticello and its surrounding communities have experienced the largest population growth percentage.

Chemotherapy and radiation therapy will be among the services included in the Humphrey Cancer Center, which currently has locations in Robbinsdale, Fridley and Coon Rapids. Monticello's location is being planned to include a linear accelerator, a device most commonly used for external beam radiation treatments for patients with cancer.

Oncologists, physicians who study, diagnose and treat cancerous tumors, are also expected to be on hand on a regular basis. MBLCH currently has only one oncologist, Dr. Harold N. Londer, who spends a lot of his time taking appointments in Robbinsdale.

Other specialists to be added to the medical office building include pulmonologists, cardiologists and



The new Monticello Clinic Medical Office Building, which will be built on the west side of the Monticello-Big Lake Community Hospital, is being designed to include a Humphrey Cancer Center. The project is scheduled to break ground this spring. (Graphic courtesy of MBLCH)

urologists.

MBLCH employs its emergency room physicians through North Memorial and has also contracted with it for consulting services since 1990. Mike Muenzberg, a retired North Memorial administrator, still serves as a consultant to Schwientek and the board at board meetings.

According to Muenzberg, North Memorial President and CEO Dave Cress wanted to come to the board meeting to make the announcement himself; however, the meeting conflicted with the North Memorial hospital board meeting.

"I think it's a huge, huge step," said Muenzberg, who represented North Memorial at the meeting.

A long time coming

Schwientek said the cancer center has been in discussions for about a month.

North Memorial brought the idea to the table, which Hamond said was indicative of a few telling things about the hospital district.

For one, he credited Schwientek and the hospital's staff for keeping the 40-year-old hospital campus up to date with state of the art health care services and cutting edge technology.

"Barbara (Schwientek) and her staff who have been here over the years have given us a campus today where a major healthcare system came to us and said, 'We would like to put in a cancer center,' " he said to the board. "I hope you all understand how big that is."

Secondly, Hamond praised how strong the relationship between the hospital and its doctors has grown over the past few years.

"I don't think this would have happened four years ago," he said. "And the primary reason for that is because today, I believe North (Memorial) sees the relationship that has developed over the last three to four years between our staff and our doctors."

Lastly, Hamond recognized North Memorial for its ability to step up to the plate on such a promising venture.

"They came to the table and said they'd like to put in a cancer center," he said. "From my observation, looking at this, I think this is a tremendous achievement for everybody that has worked at this hospital. I think this is really a large item in the community that we represent."

By August of next year, MBLCH expects to have physicians working in four clinics within Sherburne and Wright County: Buffalo, Albertville, the proposed Monticello Medical Office Building and the new Big Lake Clinic, which is scheduled to break ground at the end of this month.

At that time, Hamond said, he expects the long-term strategic vision of MBLCH growing from a community to a regional healthcare system to be in place.

Serving the local customer

MBLCH board member Jim Agosto (City of Otsego) is a stage-three cancer survivor. Although he has been cancer-free for about 10 years now, he remembers the hassle of having to drive to the cities for over a year to get chemotherapy treatment. Looking back on that experience, he can appreciate the full value of a local cancer center.

"My family had to go down there, friends from the local clubs had to call down there," remembered Agosto, a lawyer in town. "For the patients, when you don't even know whether or not you're going to be around and you're bargaining with the Lord, basically, on whether you'll be here or not, to have your family around, it's recuperative."

Currently, the closest cancer centers for Monticello residents to commute to is the Coborn Cancer Center (CentraCare) in St. Cloud or the Humphrey Cancer Center in Robbinsdale. The Fairview Maple Grove Medical Center, which opens in July, will also provide cancer treatment.

Another thing the cancer center would bring is a reputable name, Olson said.

"When you look at it, a brand name like 'Hubert H. Humphrey Cancer Center' is huge," he explained. "We're not going to try and do that ourselves. You can't just create that kind of credibility. It would take years. So, transferring that plan up here is a huge marketing advantage, I think, and one that patients trust."

Schwientek agreed.

"We think it would be just an awesome addition to the healthcare of this community," Schwientek said. "So many people out in this area have been affected by cancer, or their families have been affected by cancer, and they frequently have to go off and get radiation treatments. Right now, that means they go to the cities every day or they go to St. Cloud. This way, they'll be able to stay right in their home communities and get it here."

Agosto didn't have that privilege; however, he's happy to be alive today to see a potential local service that would benefit patients during a rough time.

"Everyone doesn't make it in the struggle," he said. "It's important to be close to family and friends and community. I was very lucky with stage three cancer. I was just lucky that the good Lord already had enough lawyers up there in heaven."

In other action at Thursday's meeting, the board:

- Approved the addition of \$100,000 to the finances for the new Big Lake Clinic, which is scheduled to break ground at the end of this month. MBLCH's share was approved at \$2.1 million in the joint venture with CentraCare.
- Received a donation of \$1,000 from the American Legion Auxiliary. Doris Kroll and Opal Stokes, in representation of the organization, presented the check.
- Heard the monthly financial report by Chief Financial Officer Nancy Friesen, who reported strong results for February, considering the short month. The hospital recorded a net income of \$332,000. The operating margin came out to 6.7 percent, while total margin was 8.3 percent. This brought the year-to-date income to \$1.195 million, which was \$429,000 ahead of budget and aligned with last year's level.
- Approved to proceed with design documents and go out for bids to build a new maintenance garage, a project in response to the displacement of the current six-stall garage, which is in the way of the new medical office building site. The plans were presented to the board by Ken Decker, of the hospital's environmental services department. The planned site for the new 2,900-square-foot, six-stall garage is on the far west end of the property, about three blocks from the hospital, near Main Street. Board members questioned the proposed site, and Decker said options for places to build the new garage were limited. MBLCH has a projected budget for the new garage of \$414,000, Decker said.