

The Winchester Star

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Lining up the elements WMC expansion needs final nod

By Jason Kane
The Winchester Star

Winchester — Little has changed on Amherst Street in the eight months since Valley Health announced plans for one of the biggest, most expensive construction projects in area history.

A new parking garage is well under way on the east end of the Winchester Medical Center property, but the vast majority of the shifting has occurred in meeting rooms. On June 5, Valley Health — the Winchester-based parent company of WMC — received approval for its Certificate of Public Need application from the state Department of Health.

While that means the official go-ahead has been granted from the government, the project will continue to linger in neutral until the company's board of directors gives the final nod on financial matters.

“It's a project that's going to be financed mainly through debt — the issuance of bonds,” said Al Pilog, WMC president and Valley Health senior vice president. “And that takes time to work with our internal finance department as well as our financial advisers.”

The board of directors for Valley Health is expected to discuss and possibly come to a final vote on financing at a meeting slated for Aug. 4, according to Craig Lewis, the company's senior vice president and chief financial officer. Since the expansion project was announced in November, the cost has actually decreased by \$18 million, he said — from \$178 million to \$160 million.

The drop can mainly be attributed to the economy and favorable pricing in the construction industry.



Sam Abrell of Winchester, an employee with Shockey Precast Group, aligns a wall section as a crane lowers the building component into place. Abrell is part of the crew building a new parking garage on the campus of Winchester Medical Center, part of an extensive expansion project planned by Valley Health. In the distance, a medical helicopter flies by the work site. (Photo by Jeff Taylor)

“So I think at this juncture, both the Winchester Medical Center board and the Valley Health board are favorably disposed to finalizing all approvals on this project,” he said.

The expansion project will nearly double the size of Valley Health's flagship hospital and will include a five-story tower with a basement level, an expansion of WMC's Heart and Vascular Center, a new facility

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for the hospital's laboratory, and a five-level, 560-space parking garage.

The construction for the tower, heart and vascular center, and laboratory will cost about \$140 million, the garage will be about \$10 million, and design and other costs are expected to reach about \$ 10 million, Lewis said.

If everything moves forward as planned, construction will begin in the fall and the work will be completed by the middle of 2012.

The first phase — the 560-space parking garage on the east edge of WMC's campus — will probably be complete by November. Because the garage did not require a Certificate of Public Need, construction began on that phase of the project in the spring.

The garage is intended primarily for use by patients and guests of the hospital. An enclosed bridge eventually will be built to connect the building with the future north wing of the hospital. But until then, the facility's guests will need to cross the street and enter WMC through the main entrance.

In recent days, a massive crane has been lifting vast slabs of concrete into place like giant Lego pieces and attaching them to steel beams that will hold everything together.

Crews likely will finish the outer frame of the garage within 30 days, electricity will be installed in the following months, and then bricks, signs, paint, and other elements will be added to "pretty it up," said Wes Williams, vice president of marketing and community relations.

At the moment, WMC is a 411-bed, tax-exempt, nonprofit regional referral hospital offering a variety of diagnostic, medical, surgical, and rehabilitative services.



The first phase of the hospital's expansion project — the 560-space parking garage on the east edge of WMC's campus — will probably be complete by November. (Photo by Jeff Taylor)

The medical center's service area had a population of 392,906 in 2007. That number is expected to grow by 22 percent in the next 10 years, to 479,494. The senior population in that same area is expected to jump by 58 percent.

To help fill the growing needs, the expansion project is slated to include 348,000 square feet of new space, 65,000 square feet of renovated space, and 139,000 square feet of shell space for future expansions.

The largest addition will be the north tower, which will rise above the hospital's emergency department and offer a 48-bed critical-care unit.

Pilong said he doesn't anticipate many obstacles in making those beds and extra space a reality.

"We're sort of on the home stretch here of just getting all of our ducks in a row."