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Article published Jan 4, 2008

North Port medical facility work to begin

By JOHN DAVIS
john.davis@heraldtribune.com

NORTH PORT -- With support from the county's largest hospital in hand, the North Port Regional Medical Center hopes to break ground this month, capping years of planning to fill a perceived health care void in North Port.

One-third of the facility on Toledo Blade Boulevard will be an emergency room owned and operated by Sarasota Memorial Hospital, which plans to spend \$11 million to buy and equip the space.

This marks Sarasota Memorial's first step into North Port, and many hope it will eventually lead to a full-fledged hospital serving the city of 50,000-plus residents.

"I think it's a good step in the right direction," said resident Anne Marie Lupien, who retired in North Port in 2004.

In addition to the ER, residents hope the medical center will lure doctors to the city.

Steve Boone, attorney for the developer, Bobcat Professional Center, said there has been enough interest "that we're comfortable moving forward."

The facility is scheduled to open by next January and Lee Gross, a local physician and project partner, hopes that all of the offices will have tenants by then.

"We're hoping that this facility can help spark the local economy," he said.

Even as home building has bottomed out in North Port over the past year, the city's population growth has remained a driving force behind continued commercial development.

Bobcat Professional will spend an estimated \$18 million on the project and then sell Sarasota Memorial Hospital the first floor of the building for \$5.4 million.

The medical center became a key issue in the impact fee debate in North Port when the developer said it needed city help in shaving \$2.5 million in construction costs for the project to go forward.

City leaders subsequently reduced impact fee charges for all medical offices and postponed a fee increase that saved North Port Regional Medical more than \$700,000.

North Port was disappointed when the state recently concluded North Port did not need a hospital, saying nearby facilities are adequate to serve the city and that another one would hurt surrounding medical centers.

Currently, there is no emergency room or overnight care within the city's 103 square miles.

In 2006, the state turned down applications for a hospital to be built in North Port. City residents had written 22,000 letters and e-mails lobbying the Agency for Health Care Administration for a hospital.

"Any doctor that comes into town is going to be as busy as they want to be," Gross said.

Staff writer Dave Gulliver contributed to this report.
