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North Shore hospitals plan multimillion-dollar expansions

Multimillion-dollar hospital expansion plans on the North Shore continue to march forward despite the recession.

Slidell Memorial, St. Tammany Parish, Lakeview and Louisiana Medical Center and Heart hospitals are all moving ahead with new medical facilities. North Oaks Health System in Hammond has been in the middle of its own expansion for the past four years but is waiting for the economy to stabilize before resuming construction.

Slidell Memorial Hospital

Slidell Memorial Hospital broke ground Aug. 5 on a \$19 million, 51,483-square-foot cancer center expected to take up to 15 months to complete.

CEO Bob Hawley says it wouldn't have been possible without public support.

In 2007, voters approved a bond millage that will pay for \$17.5 million in construction costs.

"Our vision is to have comprehensive and coordinated care close to home," Hawley says. "Now anybody in our service reach doesn't have to travel to New Orleans or out of state to get this level of treatment. Cancer is a devastating disease, so having family support close by and not having to do a lot of unnecessary traveling, we think that adds a lot of value."

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Slidell Memorial's cancer center will place nearly every cancer care service and discipline in one location. Medical and radiation oncology, chemotherapy infusion, lab services and many others will be in the facility, along with patient support services such as a resource library and an appearance center to help patients deal with the cosmetic issues involved with cancer care.

Citadel Builders of Metairie was named general contractor for the project, which is expected to support as many as 200 construction jobs.

St. Tammany Parish Hospital

St. Tammany Parish Hospital's \$10 million, 60,000-square-foot, three story medical office building is expected to be completed by Dec. 31. The new

facility will connect to the hospital by a climate-controlled elevated walkway.

The hospital is completing an \$800,000 project that includes renovating its Riverside building, drainage improvements and a new parking lot. The building is expected to be ready late this year.

The hospital also completed construction on a \$3.2 million sleep disorder center in Covington at the end of 2008.

Hospital spokeswoman Melissa Hodgson says plans call for further expansion in the next two years, depending on the bond market.

"After the storm, a lot of displaced people landed in St. Tammany. A certain percentage went home, but an enormous number stayed," Hodgson says. "We were the fastest growing parish in the state before the hurricane, and now we're ahead of all population projections. So hospitals are realizing that in order to meet their mission and serve the people who live here now, they have to expand."

Louisiana Medical Center and Heart Hospital

In Lacombe, the Louisiana Medical Center and Heart Hospital in May opened a 109,000-square-foot, four-story patient tower with capacity for 119 private rooms. The tower initially opened with 39 patient rooms and, as need merits, 80 additional rooms will be opened on the upper two floors.

On the tower's first floor, the hospital expanded its emergency room from 10 to 20 beds, making it the largest emergency room on the North Shore.

The \$40 million project was paid for by the hospital's parent company, MedCath Corp.

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Because of the parish's population increase, North Shore emergency rooms have become crowded, which has increased wait times, says hospital spokeswoman Ann Barks.

"People in Slidell and Covington are used to going to the closest hospital in an emergency. But if they go to those, they may wait longer to get care than if they drove a little further to the middle of the parish," Barks says. "After our expansion, we're not as crowded and now we're bigger. And despite what people think, we're a general acute care hospital so we can handle everything."

Lakeview Regional Medical Center

In Covington, officials are scheduled to break ground this month on the \$14 million Medical Arts Pavilion at Lakeview Regional Medical Center.

Covington-based Stirling Properties touts the development as the metropolitan area's newest medical office complex. It will consist of two three-story Class A office buildings.

"With the recent increases in population in St. Tammany Parish, the Medical Arts Pavilion at Lakeview Regional Medical Center in Covington will help meet the increased demand in high quality health care," says Lakeview Regional CEO Jason Cobb.

San Francisco-based Gensler is designing the buildings, while Mapp Construction is the design-build contractor and NewTrac Pacific of San Diego is the developer.

Central Progressive Bank is financing the project. John Brocato, Central Progressive senior vice president of business and government lending, says the project is expected to create more than 100 jobs and 75 construction jobs for a 12- to 16-month period.

North Oaks Health System

The only hospital that has chosen to play it safe during the recession is North Oaks Health System in Hammond. It has indefinitely halted construction on its \$200 million expansion until the economy turns around.

The expansion, which started in 2006, is in its third and final phase and was originally slated for completion in 2011. A new completion date has not been determined, says Melanie Zaffuto, spokeswoman for North Oaks.

The North Oaks board of commissioners and the administration says they "made the financially responsible decision to delay the \$200 million in expansion plans due to the current unfavorable conditions of the municipal bond market."

Over the life of a \$90 million bond issue that would help finance the project, North Oaks would face an additional \$50 million in interest costs because of rising interest rates in the bond market in recent months.

Remaining projects that have been put on hold include the \$90 million five-story hospital addition for North Oaks Medical Center, a new medical office plaza and systemwide implementation of electronic medical records.

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