



PRESS RELEASE

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Forum Discusses New Tri-County Hospital

Chiefland, Florida--On Oct. 11, an accident between the rural towns of Trenton and Newberry shut down state road 26. While directing traffic, Gilchrist County sheriff David Turner had to reroute two cars through Bronson as they were trying to get to a hospital in Gainesville in a hurry.

Turner said this incident is an example of how the new Tri-County hospital will affect residents of Dixie, Gilchrist and Levy counties.

"We can't wait," he said.

That same night, healthcare providers met to discuss the impact of the new hospital at a forum moderated by WellFlorida at Tommy Usher Community Center in Chiefland.

"Tri-County Connects: Voicing the Vision of Local Healthcare Providers" also included community health survey findings from WellFlorida and a keynote speech by Franklin Schupp, the hospital's recently named CEO.

Resident's Needs

From Aug. 27 through Sept. 20, WellFlorida surveyed residents of Dixie, Gilchrist and Levy counties. Of the 163 surveyed, 97.1 percent felt that the overall health of the Tri-County community could be improved.

The top five health problems were identified as tobacco use, dental problems, alcohol and other drug use, physical activity and obesity, and secondhand smoke.

The top three ranked barriers to healthcare in the counties were: lack of local specialist providers, cost of healthcare, and lack of health insurance.

Of the respondents, 87.7 percent were pleased the hospital is coming to the area. Overall, respondents felt the Tri-County hospital will improve access to healthcare as it will increase the number and types of providers and decrease the distances traveled for care.

Respondents believed the community will use the hospital primarily for emergency department visits, minor injuries, x-rays and laboratory services.

Tri-County Hospital

The 60-bed hospital will be built on 20 acres of land in Chiefland on CR 320, behind the Walmart. It will offer an emergency room, surgery, physical therapy, obstetrics, gynecology and a pharmacy. There are also plans to expand to cardiology and other specialties in the future.

The hospital will have an annual payroll of \$11.5 million with about 230 full-time employees.

According to the Certificate of Need (CON) issued in April 2007, construction on the hospital must start by Oct. 3, 2008 and the hospital must be licensed and have its doors open by April 3, 2010.

Ameris Health Systems, a for-profit company based out of Nashville, Tenn., will run the hospital. The company manages community-based hospitals in rural or suburban areas.

The process to bring the hospital to Chiefland began three years ago, when Schupp, then the vice president of development for Ameris, began “kicking the tires.” After analyzing all of Florida, he said the company determined that the Tri-County area was in need of a full-service hospital.

In order to build the hospital, the company was required to apply for a CON from the state of Florida. The regulatory process requires certain healthcare providers to obtain state approval before offering new or expanded services. The process ensures that proposed services are needed for quality patient care within a particular region or community and prevents unnecessary duplication of services.

Ameris' initial application was turned down, however, so the company waited a year and then tried again. In the process of applying for their second CON, the company raised \$61 million from local businesses. Schupp said this showed the desire of residents to have a hospital in the area. The second CON was granted.

Last month the company purchased the property on which the future hospital will sit, and Schupp is currently working with lenders and physician groups to work out the details for the hospital.

Provider's Feedback

About 50 providers gathered for the “Tri-County Connects: Voicing the Vision of Local Healthcare Providers” event to give feedback and voice concerns on the future of healthcare in Dixie, Gilchrist and Levy counties.

One provider noted that primary care in the community is not very stable, and patients currently see lots of turnover of doctors and nurses.

Preventative care and education are also problems. Providers said many people in the area do not know how important it is to control their diabetes, high blood pressure and cholesterol, and are likely to only treat their symptoms.

One provider said that opening the hospital without providing education to residents is just putting a band-aid over the healthcare problems in the community.

Providers also mentioned that the hospital has already put the Tri-County area on the map for Gainesville practitioners, who are showing more interest in opening practices in the area.

However, some said that residents currently get acute care locally but seek specialist care in Gainesville. They hope the new hospital will change this perception and lend credibility to specialist care in a rural area.

Others were concerned about the hospital's lack of a cardiac department, since heart disease is one of the leading causes of death in all three counties. Schupp said he plans to provide only basic services at first, but wants to expand to more specialties later on.

Some current local healthcare providers are worried about competition from the future hospital. Schupp said that Ameris will try to work with existing providers to enhance and expand the services in the community.

Overall, providers agreed that the Tri-County Hospital will change healthcare in the community and become a hub for all sorts of development and growth.

*Partners of the event **Tri-County Connects: Voicing the Vision of Local Healthcare Providers** included: Trenton Medical Center, Inc., Bell Family Healthcare, Suwannee River AHEC, Meridian Behavioral Healthcare Inc., Lake City Community College, Chiefland Medical Center, LLC, WellFlorida Council, Inc.*

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