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Big plans for a big building?

When St. Luke's Magic Valley Medical Center moves to its new site next year, it will leave Twin Falls County with a challenge — a large, empty, specialized facility to fill.

Now, a team from Westerra Real Estate Group will spend five months examining the current hospital building and various properties around it, producing a plan that should suggest the county's best options for using it.

Jeff Blick, with Westerra, said the group started its contract on Feb. 1. Representatives met with county commissioners Thursday afternoon to plan out the next few months.

The work will require sorting through a jumble of property, including offices, storage areas, the hospital's power plant and other sites within several blocks of the hospital. And there's the 271,000-square-foot building itself, with a medical office wing, full kitchen, lab areas, laundry facilities, helipad and redundant power system.

Maintenance worker Rick Morgan works in the St. Luke's Magic Valley Medical Center power plant Thursday in Twin Falls. Twin Falls County has hired Westerra Real Estate Group to examine the hospital building and various properties around it to produce a plan to outline the county's best options for using the building when St. Luke's vacates it for its new Twin Falls hospital in 2011.



It's a unique facility, and it's not entirely clear who might consider it a worthy home. County residents have already suggested a few uses, Commission Chairman George Urie said, including a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs hospital. But there are some restrictions — the county itself can't start another hospital because of a non-competition agreement with St. Luke's, though county officials likely wouldn't want to anyway.

Realty and county representatives pored over satellite maps of the area marked with the various property boundaries, adjusting it as they went. Commissioners marked sites that are already being used for other things, noting the locations of the new county Safe House and apartment buildings leased out to the Valley House homeless shelter.

A large swath of Rock Creek Canyon behind the hospital, though marked on the map, isn't part of the project. And the commissioners weren't sure about a building out by the hospital's helipad, which was sold to St. Luke's when Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center's Life Flight service left the site in 2007.

Commissioner Tom Mikesell noted the main hospital building would be considered non-conforming under county code because of its proximity to the canyon, possibly leading to hurdles if a new owner or tenant does significant remodeling.

It's not fully clear yet what St. Luke's will decide to take with it when it moves across town. Urie suggested Blick and the others contact the hospital's new moving team to talk about that. It would be nice, Urie said, to be able to advertise a functional kitchen rather than just a kitchen, for example.

"We don't know what's staying or what's going," Mikesell said.

The commissioners have received some interest in the building, they said, but will not start marketing the site until after Westerra finishes its work.

The county for now is keeping all of its options open, Urie said — any or all of the properties could be sold, leased or otherwise used. He'd like to see agreements made in time for the 2011 transition, he said, noting the high cost of maintaining and securing an empty building of that size.

"That would be the ideal situation, of course," he said.