

Twin Falls Times News, Wednesday, May 20, 2009 – by Nate Poppino

Planning continues for new Jerome hospital

Officials with St. Benedicts Family Medical Center in Jerome say work continues to be planned for the hospital's move to a site at Crossroads Point, near the intersection of Interstate 84 and U.S. Highway 93.

Hospital Administrator Al Stevenson announced Monday that recently completed studies show the hospital will be able to handle the estimated debt of the project and should be able to get vital community donations and support through a capital fundraising campaign. St. Benedicts is owned by Minnesota-based Essentia Community Hospitals and Clinics, a nonprofit that runs two other rural hospitals in Idaho.

The hospital would likely need to borrow between \$20 million and \$30 million for a 25-bed critical-access facility, Stevenson said, the general estimate officials have quoted since 2006.

There's no time frame yet for when officials plan to secure the project's funding, and Stevenson said he hopes the financial markets are calmer by the time the money is needed. Projects are being reviewed much more closely now due to the recession, he said.

"We're optimistic we will be able to issue the debt and build it," he said of the new hospital.

For the moment, officials have their attention on a proposed medical office building also slated for Crossroads Point. Stevenson said the building has always been in the plans and is now in the first phase of development, where officials search for a qualified medical-building developer to finance and design the work. The hospital will help the developer find tenants for the building.

Of course, to be able to bear the debt, the hospital has to keep its current finances healthy. Stevenson said officials have spent the past few months finding places to trim the hospital's budget without harming services or laying off employees, while also pushing to collect patient bills on a timelier basis. Like many hospitals, he said, St. Benedicts has taken on more charity care and bad debt lately.

Officials do plan to have help with the project. Working with Jackson and Associates of Colorado, the hospital has assembled a fundraising goal and plan for a "viable" capital campaign, Stevenson said.

But he won't release those numbers until well after the 12- to 24-month campaign begins and a few large donors are on board.

"It's critical that we get support from the local community for the project," he said.

"We believe the support is out there."