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St. Luke's plans new same-day surgery center

Outpatient surgery at a hospital can be a hassle, especially if higher-priority patients cause delays. Officials at St. Luke's Magic Valley Medical Center want to change that. "We needed a better mousetrap," St. Luke's Chief Financial Officer John Groesbeck said Thursday of the ambulatory surgery center his company plans to build in northern Twin Falls.

Also known as "same-day" surgery centers, such stand-alone facilities provide surgical services that don't require a stay in a hospital. While any outpatient procedure could conceivably be done there, Groesbeck said, St. Luke's will initially focus on three surgery areas: orthopedic, plastic, and ear, nose and throat.

The \$4.5 million, 16,000-square-foot center will stand next to DaVita Twin Falls Dialysis Center on Canyon Crest Drive. Hospital officials hope to start work in July and open the facility in April 2011, in time to help juggle surgeries as the main hospital moves to its own new building.

The two new facilities should be able to handle the city's surgery needs for the next decade, Groesbeck said. The same-day center will open three operating rooms right away, saving a fourth for future growth, and its patients will be carefully selected — those at risk of serious complications during their surgery will still be seen at the hospital to take advantage of its resources.

The idea of building a stand-alone center dates back to when St. Luke's started planning its new hospital building, Groesbeck said. Officials this year decided that it was time to move forward, and Groesbeck on Wednesday met with hospital staff to go over the final architectural renderings.

The center will give St. Luke's patients a dedicated place where emergencies and trauma cases won't pre-empt their care, Groesbeck said. He said it will also allow more efficient use of the hospital, where outpatient cases now make up about half of surgeries and continue to grow, thanks in part to advances in technology.

While the business side will be St. Luke's, the actual building will be owned by a new company formed by the hospital, a few physicians and other investors, Groesbeck said. The hospital will then lease the structure, cutting its initial costs. Though St. Luke's certainly won't complain if it gets more business or market share from its planned center, officials said, that wasn't their primary goal. Rather, the focus was on balancing existing surgery volumes better, Groesbeck said. Stand-alone ambulatory centers are somewhat rare in south-central Idaho. The national Accreditation Association for Ambulatory Health Care accredits just three in the Magic Valley, according to its website.

Shirley Ramey, nurse manager at the Ambulatory Surgery Center of Burley, said she doesn't expect to see much impact from the Twin Falls venture as St. Luke's already does same-day procedures. And Linda Trainor, administrator of the Sawtooth Surgery Center in Twin Falls, noted the good relationship her center maintains with the hospital and said Sawtooth remains a viable health care provider and small business.

"We feel that we're an example of how health care can be done more efficiently and more cost-effectively," Trainor said.