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Officials: St. Ben's making progress on new facility

Officials with St. Benedict's Family Medical Center in Jerome broke their silence this week on plans for their new facility at Crossroads Point.

Officials had declined to comment on the project for several months after reporting last year that they were starting the process over. But a Thursday release offered a few more details, including that the hospital is interviewing architects to design the facility and that Wipfli LLP is completing a market demand and financial feasibility study.

The move has been in the works since 2002. Hospital officials said in 2006 that a new building could cost between \$20 million and \$30 million and would likely keep the current 25 patient beds. It's not clear, however, how time has affected that figure.

Hospital CEO Alan Stevenson said Friday that new numbers would be released once an architect is selected and the various studies and plans are completed. The new building won't have more than 25 beds, he said, because St. Benedict's will maintain its status as a critical-access hospital - a rural hospital specializing in acute care.

"It could be something less," Stevenson said.

The hospital is owned by Essentia Community Hospitals and Clinics, a subsidiary of Minnesota-based Benedictine Health System. As a private nonprofit, it has several financing options open to it, Stevenson said, including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development loan program that nearby Gooding County Memorial Hospital is using to finance its new facility.

St. Benedict's can also turn to the revenue bond market operated through the Idaho Health Facilities Authority. And the hospital's foundation will launch a capital campaign soon to "gather community support" for the project, Stevenson said.

The new building will be on 30 acres acquired in June 2007. No groundbreaking date has been released yet. The project is one of three new hospitals planned to be built in the area over the next couple of years.

Officials with the Gooding hospital will break ground on the new North Canyon Medical Center on Sept. 16. And the new St. Luke's Magic Valley Medical Center in Twin Falls should be completed by 2010.

St. Benedict's officials are still talking to other health providers, including St. Luke's Magic Valley, about collaborations and partnerships, St. Benedict's spokeswoman Christy Davies said.

"We're still very committed to working on a collaborative basis with all the other hospitals in the Magic Valley," Stevenson said.