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St. Mary's Hospital plans to open Grangeville clinic

GRANGEVILLE - The head of St. Mary's Hospital and Clinics in Cottonwood says a new clinic is likely to be opened in Grangeville by fall.

Casey Meza, chief executive officer of St. Mary's, said Friday the hospital does not have a definite date for opening its Grangeville clinic, but has been in the process of giving three renters in the building the hospital owns time to make other arrangements.

"All three found other opportunities by May 1, so we will be going in to do some wiring, minor construction and a general facelift" to the building, Meza said. "It is our goal to be in there by fall."

St. Mary's announced plans several weeks ago to open a clinic in its Grangeville physical therapy office located about 60 feet away from Syringa General Hospital. St. Mary's board members said the decision was made after numerous requests from patients who travel to the Cottonwood hospital from as far away as Riggins, Elk City and Grangeville.

Syringa Administrator Joe Cladouhos, however, characterized it as a stealth move against the small, taxpayer-supported Grangeville hospital by corporate-owned St. Mary's. Recently Cladouhos questioned whether St. Mary's might jeopardize its critical access hospital status, which guarantees a certain rate of payback for Medicare patients in rural areas.

Meza said Friday that opening a clinic in Grangeville will not change the critical access hospital status and that the move is simply an effort to better serve existing St. Mary's patients.

"We have been assured that we are completely within our rights to include physician services" to patients in the Grangeville area, Meza said. "We have talked about doing this for 20 years, so it wasn't really that stealthy of a move." Meza said 25 percent of the patients who come to the Cottonwood Clinic are from the Grangeville area and that moving services out to the communities where patients live has been the hospital's business model for many years. "Our doctors start in Cottonwood, but they go to the communities (including Nezperce, Craigmont, Kamiah and Elk City) to see patients that want to see them," Meza said. "It's much easier for our professionals to go to the communities than to expect the communities to come to us, because when people go to the doctors, they're sick and if they're elderly or a young family, it's much easier for our professionals to get on the road and go to them."

Cladouhos has noted the 15-mile distance between Grangeville and Cottonwood is not that great and does not justify the Cottonwood hospital moving in next door to Syringa. But Meza said in the winter, when roads are icy, or closed it is difficult for many people to make that 15-mile trip.

The plan is to begin staffing the St. Mary's clinic in Grangeville with a doctor and nurse three days a week. One-and-a-half additional positions are likely to be added, Meza said, as office staff to for the clinic. "In the meantime we are going to be sending existing physicians and mid-level providers over there ... to provide a service center to our patients," she said.