Hospital dancing to construction tunes

Kootenai Health continues operating with precision during upgrades

COEUR d’ALENE — Derek Miller compared major construction while still operating an active hospital to a dance.

But Kootenai Health, the director of planning and property management added, is no stranger to getting on the dance floor.

“We at Kootenai have been dancing for quite a while, so we have a lot of systems in place that allow us to carefully coordinate each and every one of these activities,” Miller said. “We’ve been under construction for a while now, so it’s like a fine-tuned machine.”

The latest, $45.2 million phase of construction at Kootenai Health focuses on expanding the community-owned hospital’s emergency department, as well as increasing the number of operating rooms. Jeremy Evans, executive vice president of operations, told The Press that the project, called Phase Two, spawned from the hospital growing from a community hospital to a regional medical center.

“We’re able to offer more services, but our space becomes a limitation to that continued growth and presents a capacity challenge,” Evans said.

“This is an interesting challenge too because it has made our emergency department even busier than before, and it was already one of the busiest in the state of Idaho,” added Jon Ness, CEO of Kootenai Health.

According to Ness, the current physical footprint of Kootenai Health was designed to treat approximately 32,000 patient visits in a given year. In 2016, Ness said, the hospital will easily exceed 50,000 patient visits.

The hospital developed patient-volume projections several years ago that, according to Ness, it is already well ahead of. Ness added patient volume this year has already met the volume projected for 2017.

Once construction is completed in the summer of 2018, Ness said Kootenai Health’s emergency department will be able to accommodate 57,000 visits per year. In addition to expansion of the emergency department and operating rooms, the project will also involve expanding portions of the hospital, such as sterile processing and the pharmacy, that function as support services.

Ness readily admits though that getting to the finish line is no simple task.

“This is not checkers, it’s multi-layered chess,” he said. “There is some elegant planning and staging that’s done between these guys and our contractors.”
From the moment a project at Kootenai Health hits the planning stages, Miller said there is careful attention paid to what will be built first, and the optimal way to stagger each component of construction. The goal from day one of Phase Two, Evans added, was to not sacrifice the hospital’s patient capacity during construction.

“At the end of the day, it’s not about the facility,” Evans said. “It’s about the patients and the services we provide to them — it’s about serving the community.”

The result of prioritizing patients during a time of construction, Evans said, was making sure they’re well aware of where they are going. As soon as a patient enters the Kootenai Health campus, Evans said, they are greeted by clear signage, as well as a larger staff of valet attendants who are able to assist people in leaving their vehicles.

At the entrance to the emergency room are greeters and triage nurses waiting to show patients where to go.

“I think when our patients come they are actually surprised by the easy access because they expect it to be difficult,” Evans said.

Construction is focused on the creation of new space, which Evans said will be completed by next summer before the hospital shifts to renovating the current facilities. Evans added that they are proud of the qualified team of subcontractors that’s working on the expansion.

“And a big part of those qualifications is their ability to perform separation between occupied and unoccupied areas, as well as maintain cleanliness on the job site,” Evans added.

The trio of Kootenai Health leaders told The Press that the successful completion of the East Expansion Project, the first major expansion at the hospital in more than 30 years, has instilled confidence in the team that Phase Two will be just as successful. The East Expansion, Ness noted, was done on schedule and under budget, with the completed project receiving national recognition.

“It’s the same successful formula we’ve just used, but with a different project,” Ness said, adding that the current project supports the hospital’s vision and mission.

“We always, always remember at Kootenai Health that this is a community-owned hospital. Our vision is that we want to be a comprehensive regional medical center serving all of North Idaho. In order to do that, and to attract physicians and employees, we need state-of-the-art facilities and technology.”

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