



Triad's Turkey

Critics call hospital site north of Eugene a foul choice for urban sprawl.

BY ALAN PITTMAN

Sprawl opponents are crying foul over a Triad proposal for a new hospital on the far north edge of Eugene.

"It's a turkey," said Lauri Segel, a planning advocate with the state land-use watchdog group, 1000 Friends of Oregon.

"It's a terrible sprawl location," said Kevin Matthews, president of Friends of Eugene. "It's crazy."

For its new \$225 million hospital with 825 employees, Triad chose 42 acres of golf course on a rural cul-de-sac off Delta Highway that's outside city limits.

Such sprawl development is widely criticized for increasing taxes because of its heavy demands for new road and other infrastructure and services, increasing pollution from car exhaust, paving over natural areas, increasing traffic congestion, increasing obesity and reducing quality of life.

"The more we spread out essential services like this, the further we get from sustainable development in Eugene," Matthews said.

To fight sprawl, Eugene's planning goals call for compact urban growth. The city has been trying to get a hospital to locate in the central city since PeaceHealth announced plans to leave downtown for a similar site in north Springfield four years ago.

But Triad, the Texas corporation that bought McKenzie-Willamette hospital two years ago, said the RiverRidge golf-course outside Eugene is their top choice. Chris Holden, the regional president for Triad, flew in for the Nov. 16 press conference. "There's lots of space, it's ready to go," he said of the site.

Stuck in Traffic

But critics said the site is far from ready to go. The huge new hospital and related medical office buildings and development will pour thousands of cars into a freeway intersection that's already one of the worst bottlenecks in the region. Drivers have complained about the Delta Highway-Beltline Highway interchange for years.

Fixing the interchange and widening Beltline to accommodate the extra congestion could cost as much as \$150 million, officials have estimated. Just increasing capacity at Delta-Beltline with new ramps and a wider overpass could cost at least \$8 million, according to earlier estimates. Widening Beltline to the east including a wider Willamette River bridge and ramp work could cost another \$17 million, planners have estimated.

Triad's local hospital director Roy Orr suggested the city should use the estimated \$3.2 million a year the city will get in new tax revenue from the hospital to subsidize roadwork for the project. The most Holden would offer was that the corporation was "not ruling out" helping to pay for some of the road work.

Whatever Triad doesn't pay, taxpayers could get stuck with.

'It could be anything between two and five years, just for the land use [amendments], assuming everything goes swimmingly.'

— Jan Wilson, CHOICES

That's not fair, said Matthews. "People here are taxed for growth that often reduces the quality of life for the people who are already here," Matthews said. "They need to pay their own way."

Any taxpayer subsidies for the site will increase Triad's corporate profits. Triad is one of the nation's largest for-profit hospital chains with more than 50 hospitals in the South and West and almost \$5 billion in annual revenues.

State regulations may force the corporation to cough up more than it expects for the road work. A citizen lawsuit forced PeaceHealth to pay \$17 million for freeway and other road work around its RiverBend hospital site near the clogged I-5 and Beltline interchange. Like Triad now, PeaceHealth argued that it wouldn't have a big traffic impact and wasn't responsible for solving traffic problems. But state land-use rules require big projects to have adequate transportation infrastructure in place, and the hospital lost in court.

Triad may have to pay even more than PeaceHealth, according to Jan Wilson, an attorney with CHOICES (Coalition for Health Options In Central Eugene-Springfield). Plans for an I-5-Beltline interchange

overhaul near PeaceHealth's site were already in the pipeline and partially funded. PeaceHealth only had to pay to speed them up. But plans for a Beltline-Delta overhaul and highway widening aren't even on the drawing board and with no funding identified, would take much more money from Triad to get fast tracked.

Even if Triad offered to foot the cost, it could take years to get the roadwork in the funding pipeline, planned, processed and completed. TransPlan, the region's official planning document, estimates that such major transportation projects "can take as long as 10 years to complete" from inception to concrete.

More delay could come from requirements to amend the region's land use plans. The MetroPlan would require rezoning the golf course from its current residential designation to commercial. That would take hearings and majority votes by planning commissions and elected bodies from Eugene, Springfield and Lane County.

"It could be anything between two and five years, just for the land use [amendments], assuming everything goes swimmingly," Wilson said. But things won't go swimmingly, she said, since legal appeals against the controversial siting decision are likely.

Wilson and Segel said such appeals would have a good chance of winning. State land use goals and regulations protect farm land from urban sprawl and limit rezoning residential land to commercial if there's inadequate supplies of residential land, as homebuilders have argued for years.

To meet urbanization rules, Triad could also have to argue that it had no options within the city to build a hospital, despite the city offering numerous other sites, Segel said. "That would be a hard argument to make."

Matthews calls Delta tragically similar to PeaceHealth's RiverBend site. "One sprawl hospital is bad enough. We don't need two sprawl hospitals."

While PeaceHealth was able to use local political muscle and land use expertise to pull off its deal eventually, Matthews doubts the Texas corporation has the same local clout.

Wilson agrees, "we're working with a Texas company that doesn't have a clue."

Ploy?

With so many transportation and planning obstacles, critics wonder if Triad is actually serious about the Delta site.

"It's a ploy," said Segel, who suspects Triad must know that the site is "completely unrealistic."

"It can't be a real [sitting] decision, it doesn't make sense," Wilson said. "This site is not happening," she said. "Something else is going on."

Critics speculated that Triad may have no intention of

actually locating at Delta and could be using the site to get in line for a required hospital certificate of need (CoN) from the state. Earlier this year, the state refused to process Triad's application for a certificate concurrent with PeaceHealth's application for more beds at its downtown facility. After lobbying from PeaceHealth, the state said Triad needed a solid purchase agreement on a site before it would accept the application. Triad complained that PeaceHealth would gobble up the limited number of new hospital beds available and sued the state, but lost.

With a purchase agreement for the Delta site, Triad said last week it would immediately re-apply for the state CoN.

Another ulterior motive, critics speculated, could be to pressure property owners at other sites or the city of Eugene to offer a lower land price or greater subsidies.

Triad may also be using the site as a political bludgeon, critics speculated. An outcry by progressives on the council against the site could allow Triad to blame them for chasing the hospital out of Eugene.

Pro-sprawl interests have already sought to blame council progressives for chasing PeaceHealth to Springfield. *The*