

# Bethesda West Hospital conceived at time of break-neck growth

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Standing over a wooden model of the planned Bethesda West Hospital, Robert Hill pointed to a space reserved for an add-on specialty hospital.

Exactly which specialty might be built on the site? Bethesda's CEO couldn't say with certainty. Not yet.

"It could be a women's hospital. It could be a pediatric hospital," Hill told physicians attending Bethesda West's May 18 groundbreaking ceremony. "We don't know what's going to happen 10 years from now, not in this business."

Forecasting health care demand has always been tricky, as population, technology and political changes upend the best made plans.

But in Florida, forecasts are critical, because the application, approval, challenge and appeals process for construction of a new hospital can drag on for years.

That's exactly what happened in Bethesda's case.

It was more than 10 years ago that Bethesda Healthcare System first began planning for a hospital to serve residents living in western Boynton Beach, a once-agricultural enclave near Florida's Turnpike.

The people moving into the western Boynton community in the 1990s quickly learned that homebuilding was outpacing services and they lobbied hard for a hospital of their own.

"We did a study, starting at Boynton Beach Boulevard and Jog Road, to see how long it would take to get to all the hospitals," recalled Ken Lassiter, a retired Kodak executive who left Rochester, N.Y. for Florida in the mid-1990s.

The five hospitals western Boynton homeowners used most often were West Boca Medical Center, Delray Beach Medical Center, JFK Medical Center, Wellington Regional Medical Center and Bethesda Memorial Hospital, he said.

"Depending on the time of day and the traffic, it took 20 or 25 minutes" to drive to any of them, said Lassiter, now president of the Coalition of Boynton West Residential Associations.

Meanwhile, emergency rooms were so crowded that ambulance drivers had to check a website to keep track of which hospitals were diverting ambulances. Emergency room waits of six hours or more weren't uncommon.

Since then, most of the hospitals have expanded their ERs, and emergency providers say diversions are a relic. Lassiter praised Bethesda for fulfilling its commitment to build a new hospital in the west.

"COBWRA pleaded with the officials to look at our growth record and projected future population gains," he said at the Bethesda West groundbreaking ceremony. "We related how long people were waiting in emergency rooms during the season. They listened."

Bethesda won state approval for a west Boynton hospital in 2003.

That year, state records show, the five hospitals serving the area collectively billed 373,518 patient days.

Their annual occupancy rates averaged 70 percent to 80 percent each, and expectations were that growth would continue unabated.

But that's not what happened.

Bethesda's competitors filed legal challenges against its right to build a western hospital. While those challenges wound their way through the system, hurricanes battered the area, followed by the economic downturn and foreclosure crisis.

Today, with one in five area homeowners behind on mortgages, and with the area's retiree-heavy population giving way to younger, healthier people, the demand for hospital services has fallen since 2003.

Last year, state figures show, the same five hospitals collectively billed 361,516 patient days, about 3.2 percent less than when Bethesda got the green light to build.

While it fought in court for the right to go ahead with the project, Hill said Bethesda stayed abreast of the changing marketplace. Although some parts of Palm Beach County have lost population, western Boynton Beach continues to grow, he said.

"We think the need is even more pronounced now," Hill said. "We've kept monitoring the need and we think it has only gotten stronger."

He pointed to a request by homebuilder GL Homes to swap land with Palm Beach County so that it can construct 2,700 homes in western Boynton. Plus, health reform will likely increase health care demand, and Florida will always have a place as a retirement haven, he said.

"Baby boomers don't even start retiring until three years from now," Hill said.

Two and a half years and \$130 million from now, when the hospital opens, Bethesda West will have 80 beds and a medical office building. It could grow to become a 400-bed hospital, the size of Bethesda Memorial, Hill said.

Now that ground has been broken on the project, Hill said he has no hard feelings against the competitors who fought and delayed the project. "It's unfortunately the way the process is set up to work," Hill said.