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Tenet plans new Palm Beach Gardens hospital with Scripps

By **STACEY SINGER**

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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Tenet Florida announced plans Monday to build an 80-bed academic and clinical research hospital on county-owned land in Palm Beach Gardens, in partnership with The Scripps Research Institute.

County and state officials hailed it as a job creator and spark for an expanded biotechnology corridor along Donald Ross Road, but the CEO of nearby Jupiter Medical Center called the project unnecessary. The hospital will rise on a 30-acre wooded tract east of Interstate 95 that's zoned for biotech labs, offices, retail, a hotel and about 2,700 homes.

Palm Beach County Commission Vice Chair Shelley Vana predicted the hospital would create an economic impact of about \$402 million over five years.

"Four hundred is a good number, and it is a return on our investment," Vana said.

Tenet Senior Vice President Marsha Powers said the hospital would emphasize orthopedics, oncology, senior care and digestive disorders, and collaborate with the new medical school at Florida Atlantic University, offering internships and residencies.

Construction should create 250 full-time jobs for two years, and the hospital itself will employ 250 to 300 once the state approves its permit application, said Scripps Chief Operating Officer Douglas Bingham.

The state requires proof that new hospitals are needed before they can be built, and existing Palm Beach County hospitals have struggled with low occupancy amid the economic downturn.

Powers said the 80 beds would come from three existing Tenet hospitals in the region: St. Mary's, Palm Beach Gardens and Good Samaritan medical centers.

If the permit application goes smoothly, it will allow ground-breaking to start in about a year, she said.

Jupiter Medical Center CEO John Couris said that's unlikely. His nonprofit hospital intends to challenge the permit application, he said.

"While they are moving beds, they are downsizing three other hospitals, so I am not sure what new jobs they are going to be adding to the community," Couris said. "This is less to do with Scripps than it is about Tenet wanting to move into a more lucrative market."

Jupiter Medical Center is less than 4 miles from Scripps, and recently announced plans to add 43 beds, focused on the same service areas that Tenet plans to emphasize.

"Is it coincidental that Tenet's focus is going to be cancer, orthopedics, geriatrics and GI (gastrointestinal)? That's what we've been talking about," Couris said. "We have a process in the state that will allow us to challenge this on its merits in an open and transparent way, and we plan to do just that."

The creation of a biotech hub was a critical goal of the state's initial \$310 million incentive grant to Scripps in 2005. Palm Beach County invested \$208 million more, not counting a false start at Mecca Farms, an orange grove near the Acreage, that cost about another \$80 million .

Since it launched, Scripps has attracted more than \$188 million in research grants and hired about 400 scientists and support staff, in addition to attracting the Max Planck Society to build a Florida institute.

Bingham said having an academic hospital across the street from its labs and those of the Max Planck institute is an important element that will enable scientists to attract federal grants meant to accelerate research to patients' bedsides, where it can make a difference.

"If you look at where most improvements are coming from in health care, it's from the academic research institutes," he said. "The dream is to make this a destination medical center and make it one of the best medical centers in the world."

Early on, Scripps' president tried to entice elite hospitals like Massachusetts General to operate a hospital here. But state rules complicated discussions.

The new hospital will be built within Scripps' portion of 70 wooded acres the county bought to allow the research institute to expand over the years. Tenet will sublease it from Scripps.

On hand for the announcement was Florida Atlantic University President Mary Jane Saunders, who said the hospital will collaborate with FAU's Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine, which last week admitted its first class of 64 students. The med school will include a dual M.D./Ph.D. degree track, with the M.D. given by FAU and the Ph.D. given by Scripps' Kellogg School of Science and Technology.

"Our students will start doing some clinical rotations right away, and then really spend time in hospitals in years three and four," she said. "The curriculum has a public health focus that requires research."

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