

Pulte seeks new 'MO' zone for Anthem hospital *The plan is to open in 18 months*

By MARK COWLING, Editor

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Pulte Homes has applied to rezone the northern corner of Anthem to a new "MO" Medical/ Office use for what could eventually be a 40-acre hospital campus with medical offices.



Mark Cowling/ Florence Reminder, Jim McDowell (left), site developer of the future Florence Hospital at Anthem, and Gilbert Hospital CEO David S. Wanger.

Gilbert Hospital CEO David Wanger told the Town Council Monday that he is expected to also be CEO of the new "Florence Hospital at Anthem." He said the new hospital will continue Gilbert Hospital's core emphasis on ER service and its "core business principle" that "the physician should govern the entire patient care experience."

"We're the home of 'door to doc in 31 minutes' and we do it 98 percent of the time. ... The demand is now to go out and replicate the model and Florence is the first place we're going to do that," Wanger told the council. The property is at the southeast corner of Hunt Highway and the Franklin Road alignment.

The site is "nothing short of exceptional for us," Wanger said. He said residents could see dirt moving around Thanksgiving, with completion in late 2009 or early 2010. Pulte and Gilbert Hospital confirmed earlier this year that Gilbert Hospital is buying approximately 10 acres for a future hospital. With the rezoning now pending, they will have an additional 30 acres to master plan the hospital campus.

The land is currently zoned for housing. The Town Council Monday heard the first reading of an ordinance to amend Anthem at Merrill Ranch's Planned Unit Development for the new "MO" zoning on approximately 40 acres. The ordinance also includes expanding the planned commercial corner northwest of Hunt Highway and Merrill Ranch Parkway by 8.4 acres. The ordinance will return to the council for action on July 7.

The project's design review application will then go before the Planning & Zoning Commission in July. Wanger told the council the hospital would be very cooperative with the community's wishes for how it should look on the outside.

Once design review is complete, the hospital can submit construction plans and apply for permits, Planning Director Mark Eckhoff said.

The hospital could help kickstart development on the other three corners of Hunt Highway and Franklin Road. An LDS church is planned across Hunt Highway on the southwest corner. The business and commercial park La Entrada is planned on the northern corners, Eckhoff said. Wanger said, "Hospitals tend to drive a lot of development."

In a public hearing on the ordinance Monday, Phillip Cross of Pulte Homes told the council the company has now closed more than 850 home sales in Anthem at Merrill Ranch, adding approximately 1,500 residents to Florence.

Wanger told the council when Gilbert Hospital opened at Power and Ray roads nearly two and one-half years ago, it had 100 employees and it now has almost 400. He said the hospital sees about 50,000 emergency room patients a year and will see \$140 million in gross revenues this year.

He said the Florence hospital will have 20 rooms for emergency room patients, including trauma and triage; 36 inpatient beds (18 general acute care and 18 incarcerated acute care); four ICU beds; MRI, CT, nuclear medicine, digital X-ray and ultrasound; a full service diagnostic laboratory; a pharmacy; two operating rooms with full surgery capabilities; 350 employees after the first year; and a medical staff anticipated at 150 after the first year.

As for the correctional beds, "no one will see those folks coming in or being treated," Wanger said.

He said the hospital would have an estimated payroll of \$15.5 million and gross revenues of \$40 million to \$50 million the first year.

Banner Health has just broken ground June 5 on the future Banner Ironwood Medical Center on N. Gantzel Road in Queen Creek. This 220,000-square-foot hospital is expected to have 24 beds and a full-service emergency department with 19 private treatment areas.

Wanger said the new Florence hospital should open at about the same time as the Queen Creek hospital. He said he would like to be first, but it's not essential to the business plan.

Council member Barbara Brown commented, "We're just very pleased this is finally coming to fruition."

In other business:

* Paul Babeu, candidate for sheriff, introduced himself to the council.

* The council passed a resolution adopting a town budget for the new fiscal year. In a separate resolution, the council adopted a compensation plan that gives town employees a 2 percent cost-of-living raise and merit raises of up to 5 percent.

Finance Director Becki Guilin said the town has been very conservative in its salary plan and didn't have to cut any jobs. Brown and Vice Mayor Tom Smith noted some other cities and towns are struggling.

* The council heard the first reading of an ordinance levying property taxes in an amount of \$535,773, at a property tax rate of just under 82 cents. The town's current property tax rate is 99 cents per \$100 of assessed valuation.

* Sitting as the board of directors of Merrill Ranch Community Facilities District No. 1, the mayor and council members held a public hearing on \$6,769,000 worth of projects to be acquired through the sale of general obligation bonds.

Covered are pending improvement projects on American Way and Constitution Way, and completed projects on Felix Road, Independence Way, Sun City Boulevard and Merrill Ranch Parkway. No one spoke at the public hearing.

The board approved a resolution adopting a budget for the district for fiscal year 2008-09. The board passed another resolution allowing for the issuance of up to \$4.7 million in general obligation bonds for public infrastructure.

The board heard the first reading of an ordinance continuing the district's secondary property tax rate at \$3.55 per \$100 of net assessed valuation.

* Sitting as the board of directors of Merrill Ranch Community Facilities District No. 2, the mayor and council members approved a budget for the district for the new fiscal year.

The board also heard the first reading of an ordinance continuing the district's secondary property tax rate at \$3.55 per \$100 of net assessed valuation.