


Home » Local News » Queen Creek & Pinal County

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Hospital owners plan to build in Florence

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SARAH J. BOGGAN, TRIBUNE

The owners of busy Gilbert Hospital plan to build on their success by constructing another hospital in Florence's master-planned community Anthem at Merrill Ranch.

The planned 50,000-square-foot, 40-bed Florence Hospital at Anthem could open as soon as the end of 2009, and will follow Gilbert Hospital's promise of patients seeing a doctor in 31 minutes or less.

"We look for underserved areas, and frankly the whole Valley is underserved medically right now," said David Wanger, CEO for Gilbert Hospital.

For now, the closest hospitals for Florence and Pinal County residents in the San Tan area are Gilbert Hospital on Power Road between Ray and Williams Field roads in Gilbert; Pinal County's only hospital, Casa Grande Regional Medical Center; and Catholic Healthcare West's Mercy Gilbert Medical Center at Val Vista Drive and Loop 202's Santan Freeway in Gilbert - all about 25 to 30 miles away.

Residents of the unincorporated Pinal County area along Hunt Highway say they have to drive more than 40 minutes to get to a hospital, and accident victims and people with acute medical conditions are regularly flown by helicopter to Valley hospitals due to a lack of nearby facilities.

"This area has been without a full-service hospital for many, many years," said Jacque Petroulakis, a spokeswoman for Pulte, the developer of Anthem.

Petroulakis said several health care groups expressed interest in the property, but Gilbert Hospital was the first to make a formal offer. She said the growth at Anthem at Merrill Ranch - a 3,200 acre master-planned community that is expected to have about 9,100 homes - creates a need for many services including hospitals.

Anthem resident Sandi Campbell said the benefits of having a hospital nearby are many.

"We have our church here, our school here, our fire department here - we have everything close by, and then it's 40 minutes to go to a hospital. That's a long time," she said.

"We have kids using the playground or playing baseball, and you know what comes along with that - broken arms, busted noses and skinned knees," she said. "I'm glad it's getting here. It's something that's needed and the sooner, the better."

Neighbor Kevin McGinnis agreed. "We're excited about Gilbert Hospital being the ones bringing it," he said.

His mother-in-law who lives in Sun City Anthem recently got hurt and went to Gilbert Hospital and was seen in less than 15 minutes, he said.

McGinnis said he's also concerned about the young families having children. Some women in his community are having children at home or planning C-sections because hospitals are so far away, he said.

"We just had a baby, and it took us several trips to figure out where we wanted to have the baby," he said. "There was stress on mom worrying that she was going to go into labor, and we wouldn't get there on time."

Florence Hospital is planned to open with a 50,000-square-foot, two-story building that will house about 20 inpatient beds, 20 emergency department rooms, two operating rooms and full diagnostic capabilities including MRI, CT scan, digital X-ray, nuclear medicine, ultrasound, a laboratory, a blood bank and a pharmacy.

Hospital officials said they expect to employ about 350 people by the end of the first year.

Ten acres of land, on the southwest corner of Franklin Road and Hunt Highway in Anthem at Merrill Ranch, are in escrow with Pulte Homes and are the first phase of a 40-acre medical complex that will include two medical office buildings, Wanger said.

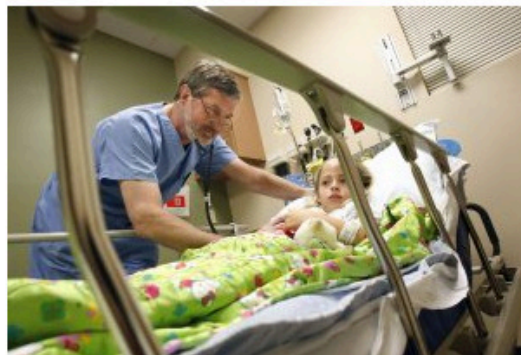
Gilbert Hospital also is working on an additional location in Peoria, Wanger said.

The Florence and Peoria locations, though held by different owners, will embrace the same philosophy and model of Gilbert Hospital. The facilities will be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and will be focused on the mantra: "From door to doc in 31 minutes."

Gilbert Hospital opened in February 2006 as the first hospital in Gilbert. The facility has 29 beds and is already expanding, adding another 108 beds by fall 2009, Wanger said.

In 2007, Gilbert Hospital saw and treated more than 51,000 patients in its emergency department, making it one of the busiest emergency departments in the Valley, hospital officials said.

Thursday, April 3, 2008 | 5:11 pm



BUSY: Gilbert Hospital chief of staff Dr. Richard Carey checks vitals on 7-year-old patient Melanie Tietjen of Queen Creek at the hospital on Power Road south of Ray Road. The hospital is one of the closest in the area for Pinal County.

Ralph Fresco, Tribune

