

Steel shapes new hospital

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'This building is starting to come alive,' official says of health district's facility

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ESCONDIDO – Work has started on a massive network of steel columns and beams, the framework of a \$774 million hospital.

Crews have been setting and assembling pieces of steel for the first and second floors of the hospital's east wing. In a few weeks, motorists traveling on Interstate 15 through Escondido will be able to see steel rising west of the freeway.

“This building is starting to come alive,” said Chris Johnson, a superintendent with DPR Construction, which is managing the project for the Palomar Pomerado Health district. “To see the steel is a major milestone.”

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The 11-story hospital, Palomar Medical Center West, is being built by the health district on 37 acres in the Escondido Research and Technology Center. It's the largest hospital being built in the state now, DPR says.

Construction started last year and is expected to be completed by the end of

2011, officials said.

The new hospital is scheduled to open in 2012 with 300 beds. Additional beds are expected to be added when a women-and-children's center is built at an undetermined date.

Construction activity at the site has intensified in recent months. About 250 workers are erecting the steel frame.

It took eight months to produce all the steel for the project. The larger, heavier pieces came from Luxembourg. Some steel was made in Arkansas and then fabricated into specific sizes in San Bernardino.

A 360-foot crane was delivered in parts and took two weeks to put together. The crane is used to lift pieces of steel off a truck and eventually set them in place. The columns are secured with anchor bolts attached to leveling plates that have been cast into the footings.

Trucks carrying steel have been arriving since about midmonth. Some columns are so large and heavy that only one fits on a truck. Hundreds more truckloads will arrive before the frame is finished.

Building the hospital's steel frame is much like erecting one for a skyscraper, but on a smaller scale, DPR's Johnson said. Some columns are as heavy as the ones used for skyscrapers because of state requirements for hospital buildings, he said.

Heavy steel columns that look like crosses and half-crosses are part of what's called a "moment frame." Gerry DeWulf, a DPR project director, said the frame allows for a stiff connection between columns and beams, but with flexibility to withstand lateral forces, such as those in an earthquake.

Completing the steel work will take about a year, DeWulf said. Workers will build four floors of the hospital's east tower, then four floors of the west tower before starting on another part of the hospital.

A second tall crane will be brought in to work on the east and west towers while the existing one is used to build the hospital's southern portion.

"When I view the project, I don't see the concrete and the steel," DeWulf said. "I envision patients and health care."

Hospital frame facts

- Construction of Palomar Medical Center West's steel framework has started. The work is expected to take about a year.
- Motorists on Interstate 15 should see steel rising in a few weeks.
- The 11-story frame requires 11,423 pieces of steel weighing 12,445 tons. The heaviest columns weigh 23 tons each.
- About 900 trucks will be delivering steel to the hospital site. The steel was bought from mills in Luxembourg, Arkansas and elsewhere.