

PERFECT GIFT SALE
FREE SHIPPING ONLINE



ROLLOVER TO SEE
THE PERFECT GIFTS PICKED JUST FOR YOU

SUBSCRIBE

Health

LOCAL NEWS NEWS BY REGION NEWS BY TOPIC

EMAIL

PRINT

SAVE



Palomar West hospital tower takes shape; debut set in 2012

BY PAT SHERMAN

SUNDAY, MAY 17, 2009 AT 2 A.M.

ESCONDIDO — The massive steel frame of Escondido's new 11-story public hospital has become a beacon to motorists at the Interstate 15 and state Route 78 interchange.

Composed of more than 12,400 tons of steel and a million pounds of rebar, Palomar Medical Center West is the largest hospital under construction in the state, according to DPR Construction, which is building it for the Palomar Pomerado Health district.

The hospital, its steel frame nearly 80 percent complete, is expected to open in 2012 with about 300 rooms. A women-and-children's center will include additional beds when it is complete, though an opening date has not been determined.

The bulk of staff and services at the Palomar Medical Center in downtown Escondido will transfer to the new hospital when it is finished. Some services, such as outpatient care and pediatrics, will remain at the existing site, built in the 1950s and 1960s.

During a recent tour of the project, DPR project director Gerry DeWulf spoke over a steady cacophony of bulldozers, cement mixers, excavators and welding torches. Between 180 and 200 carpenters, ironworkers, electricians and other craftsmen are at work on the tower, in addition to 60 office support staff, managers and engineers located on site.

Granite boulders and rocks dug up during the excavation process are being crushed for use in landscaping surrounding the building. Several large stones are being used as aesthetic touches in interior atriums.

"Everything is being reused," DeWulf said.

Despite cost overruns of more than \$300 million on the original price tag, construction is running about a month ahead of schedule, DeWulf said.

Once complete, the building is intended to be a model of environmentally conscious aesthetic flourishes. Two-story, partially open atriums located on alternating levels will offer patients and visitors an opportunity connect with nature, get fresh air and enjoy the view. Natural, diffused sunlight will flood the lowest level of the building via light wells along the outer walls.

During the design process, nurses, maintenance workers and other staff members were asked for input.

"We've done a lot of things to make sure it (doesn't look and feel) like a basement," DeWulf said. "These people tend to work in the same space all day long. We wanted to make sure they had plenty of light."

Michael Shanahan, facilities director and the health district's staff architect, said research has shown that sunlight promotes a sense of well-being in patients.

"I've been designing hospitals a long time, and daylight is very important," Shanahan said. "I think having natural light in an otherwise high-pressure environment is good, not only for the patient but for the staff."

The atriums, designed by Spurlock Poirier landscape architects, will include naked coral and strawberry trees, as well as grasses, succulents, fountain bamboo and Mexican climbing bamboo.

"The trees and plants change form and color throughout the year as the seasons change," health district spokesman Andy Hoang said. "We're using a very rich plant palette that provides a lot of visual and sensory experiences."

An undulating "green roof" at the west end of the property will use native plants that will help keep the operating rooms underneath it cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

Next to the green roof will be an outdoor area with paved walkways, more greenery and outdoor seating for the

District officials originally considered adding solar panels to the roof but scrapped the idea because of the expense, Hoang said.

"Now that the prices have fallen, we're looking at it again," he said.

The estimated price tag for the hospital ballooned from \$531 million in 2004 to about \$917 million this year, due in part to labor costs.

"As a public entity, we have to pay fair market value for our labor contracts," Hoang said.

Looking up at the building during a recent tour, DeWulf noted steel "stiffening plates" affixed to the intersection of the beams. The plates are designed to help the building move as one unit during an earthquake. The base of the structure is anchored into the granite bedrock with steel tie-down anchors.

At the north side of the construction site, mock-ups of the building's exterior are altered as construction proceeds to reflect design modifications.

"We've made some changes," DeWulf said. "You have to make sure that everything fits together properly and that it has the right look."

DPR project executive Brian Gracz said the next major step will be to coat the steel beams and columns with a fire-resistant coating before drywall is added. The coating can withstand heat for two to three hours, giving people time to escape in case of fire, Gracz said.

Unlike the rest of the building, the green roof is supported by long structural trusses similar to those used in bridge construction. There are no interior support beams, which allows the configuration of operating rooms to be altered as needed or to accommodate new equipment.

Pat Sherman: (760) 752-6774; pat.sherman@tlnews.net