

Why Wishard Wants a New Home

System failures have become 'routine'

By Daniel Lee

Operating rooms too small to accommodate the latest medical equipment.

At a news conference today, Wishard Health Services officials are expected to announce their plan to solve those problems: construction of a roughly \$754 million hospital complex to be financed by bonds that require voter approval.

At stake, hospital officials argue, is a medical facility unlike any other in Central Indiana. It serves almost two-thirds of the uninsured hospital patients in Marion County, is an important training center for the Indiana University School of Medicine and has been recognized nationally for providing high-quality, low-cost care.

Because the current 17-building campus was built in another era — with the oldest parts dating back 95 years — renovation is no longer practical, they say. The project is not so much about expansion, they say, as survival.

Officials Say Hospital Must Rebuild To Survive

“Really, what we’re looking at is we either build new or we close down,” said Matt Gutwein, chief executive officer of the Health and Hospital Corporation of Marion County, which operates Wishard Memorial Hospital. “For the future, renovation is not an option for us to be able to meet the needs of the community.”

So Wishard plans to ask Marion County voters Nov. 3 for the right to borrow \$604 million to \$703 million — calculating best- and worse-case scenarios — over 30 years to finance a new hospital complex. Gutwein said the most likely debt level is \$613 million, according to calculations.

The 1.2 million-square-foot facility on the west side of the campus of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis would include an 11-floor hospital with about 300 inpatient beds, as well as outpatient facilities and administrative offices.

Gutwein said the more efficient new hospital would allow Wishard to treat roughly 20 percent more patients annually with about the same number of inpatient beds.

Wishard plans to finance the project with savings and hospital revenue — no tax increase — but because the bonds would be backed by the county, the financing requires voter approval.

Health and Hospital Corp. needs to win a majority in the Nov. 3 referendum — as well as receive approval from the City-County Council — to proceed with bond financing.

Hospital leaders are planning informational meetings in the coming months to discuss the need for a new hospital and Wishard’s role in the community, including services such as the state’s largest burn center and a Level 1 trauma center.

Wishard supporters also are expected to form a political action committee to campaign for a new hospital.



Some local leaders already are voicing support.

“It just has to be done,” Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard said in a statement. “Wishard’s positive impact on our community, both in terms of medical care and economic impact, reaches nearly every Indianapolis resident.”

Ballard praised Wishard for its excellent care and for putting forth a plan to increase its capacity without relying on additional tax dollars.

Administrators of other hospitals also appreciate Wishard’s contribution to Central Indiana’s health-care mix.

“Wishard plays an integral role in providing the highest level of trauma care and compassionately addresses the unique needs of our community’s poor and indigent populations,” said Vincent Caponi, CEO of Indianapolis-based St. Vincent Health.

Major systems prone to failure

Wishard said its aging facilities are quickly wearing out and lack the privacy and efficiencies found in modern hospitals.

“It is not uncommon for our major systems to fail. We have water leaks. Or steam pipes burst,” Gutwein said. “Unfortunately, it’s become routine.”

