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MURRIETA: Ground broken for new hospital

By NELSY RODRIGUEZ - Staff Writer

MURRIETA ---- Construction started Monday on a 106-bed hospital and medical office tower, which will carry the name of Loma Linda University Medical Center ---- Murrieta.

Professionals from the medical, political and development industries applauded the progress at a groundbreaking ceremony at the site of the future teaching and research hospital off Interstate 215 in northeast Murrieta.

Backers of the hospital said that although the large number of parties interested in the project could have made its progress cumbersome, the need was so apparent that no interests conflicted.

"When you have a group of individual physicians partnering with a large university, there's always friction because one wants one thing and the other wants another," said Dr. John Piconi, the spokesman for the partnership of 70 doctors who united to bring a physicians' hospital to Southwest County. "Normally, there's some rascal up there who goes there and opposes it. We never had that."

Over the next two years, contractors will work on building the 106-bed hospital and a medical office tower with an additional 114 medical beds and medical offices on 50 acres northeast of Clinton Keith Road at Interstate 215.

The \$256 million campus is proposed to include six surgical suites and a minimally invasive laparoscopic surgery center, an imaging center, emergency room, and general and acute care services. Specialty services planned include cardiovascular, obstetrics, pediatrics, urology and orthopedics.

The hospital is the brainchild of several physicians who noticed a need for specialty care in the area. The physicians then persuaded the university to come on board with the project, and a third-party hospital developer was enlisted to make it financially possible.

The campus will distinguish itself from several other local hospitals by being a teaching and research facility, as well as a specialty health care provider.

Ruthita Fike, chief executive officer of Loma Linda University Medical Center, described the collaborative efforts of the physicians and city officials to move the project through the development process as an "immediate synergy."

"In my first interaction, we felt immediately a resonance about (the need for) quality care in

Southern California," Fike said. "It was that immediate synergy that kept us at the table through every challenge we've had."

Officials say the hospital is scheduled to open Jan. 1, 2011, and generate 500 jobs.

Local officials seemed nearly giddy that groundbreaking was beginning only three months after the city gave its final approval in September.

"We'll see you guys here in about two years when we cut that ribbon and the first patient walks in," said City Councilman Rick Gibbs. "Loma Linda University Medical Center ---- Murrieta. Wow, does that sound good."

The news sounded even better to those who had been involved in the plan since its inception.

Dr. Jay Ferns, a Temecula-based family practitioner and chiropractor, was among the first few doctors who pushed for the construction of a physicians hospital. The promise of medical personnel, and not businessmen, leading the direction of care is something he and several colleagues have been waiting for.

"We had to keep it quiet for a long time because we were working with the other hospitals," Ferns said. "But we thought we could do that (build a physicians' hospital) here, and we decided we wanted that."

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