

## County a hot spot for hospital expansions

By Cam Fullam Cox News Service

Rapid population growth, easy access from surrounding communities and plenty of space for development have made Butler County and — more particularly — the Cincinnati-Dayton corridor a magnet for health care facilities.

In the wake of Mercy Fairfield's completion of a \$54 million expansion, Cincinnati Children's Hospital finalizing plans to build facilities in Liberty Township, Middletown Regional Hospital breaking ground on a new facility off Interstate 75 and The Fort Hamilton Hospital expanding and updating technology, West Chester Township has joined the ever-increasing number of locations for state-of-the-art, patient-friendly, full-service hospitals and expansions.

The Health Alliance announced last week its plans to build a new 160-bed community hospital on 29 acres of land at University Pointe campus, located off Tylersville Road near I-75.

The new health care facility, which is scheduled to open in late summer 2008, will offer a wide array of surgical, outpatient and imaging services and contain a full-service emergency department, staffed 24 hours a day. Expansion to a 300-plus-bed hospital is planned for a later date.

Bringing such a facility to the University Pointe campus has always been a goal of UC Physicians, said John Gillespie, UC Physicians marketing director. The lack of a nearby full-service, emergency hospital was good from a business standpoint, but bad for the residents.

"When we first arrived in 2002, the good news is, there wasn't a hospital for 10 miles. The bad news is, there wasn't a hospital for 10 miles," he said.

### Why here?

During the 1990s, medical facilities in Greater Cincinnati faced a problem. A combination of factors, including a perception that there were too many hospitals and pressure from the government because of rising health care costs, caused many hospitals to delay needed renovations, combine locations and services and even shut down altogether, said Coleen O'Toole, vice president of the Greater Cincinnati Health Council.

Bethesda Oak, Mercy Hamilton and Jewish Hospital of Cincinnati, each full-service inpatient and emergency hospitals, closed their doors in the past 10 years.

During this time, however, the health council saw an increase in the number of patients, the length of time they stay and the overall use of hospitals.

“There is some debate as to whether there really was excess capacity and whether or not to close,” O’Toole said. “Some say, ‘We should have kept the hospitals. Now we need them again.’ ”

Now expansions of Fort Hamilton and Mercy Fairfield are helping fill the gaps, and the new facilities to be build along I-75 will continue to reduce the strain on regional hospitals. But the decision to build these new hospitals in Butler County is not merely coincidental.

“We know that the population of Cincinnati is decreasing. But the population of Butler and Warren counties are increasing, not just because of higher birth rates, but because people are moving there from the city,” O’Toole said. “The population increase has been pretty dramatic, so the hospitals are obviously responding to the need to serve that population better.”

Ken Hanover, health alliance chief executive officer, agreed.

“By the time the hospital (at University Pointe) opens, the Butler and Warren county populations will have grown more than 10 percent,” he said. “We are excited about the possibilities of bringing our services closer to the homes of so many people.”

In addition to the population boom, baby boomers, who currently represent 14 percent of Ohio’s population according to the 2000 census, will require more medical services as they create an elderly population the U.S. Census Bureau projects will represent 1 in 5 Americans.

### **What’s new?**

Technology progresses today at a startling rate, particularly in the medical field, whether it be advances in medicine, treatment, surgery, patient care or even record-keeping.

Hospitals are always expanding, updating and changing to reflect the latest technology, and whenever a facility has the chance to rebuild or start from scratch, builders take the opportunity to be state-of-the-art.

Hanover said the health alliance hospital planned for University Pointe will be high-tech, paperless and have tie-in services with the existing medical offices at University Pointe.

Large operating rooms with voice-activation, wireless technology in patient rooms and ground-level outpatient offices are a few of the amenities patients and employees can expect.

"The entire hospital, including the design, will be as patient-friendly as possible," Hanover said.

The focus on patient-centered care is a shift in the way health care facilities do business.

Any hospital being built now would make sure it is at the convenience of the patient and the family more than the employees, said Sandy Oswald, director for marketing, planning and communications for Middletown Regional Hospital.

"Medicine certainly has changed — not just with technology — but accommodating patient's and family wishes. People are more involved in their health care now. They see themselves as partners," she said.

Middletown Regional recently closed a deal to move from its current location to a 200-acre plot immediately east of I-75 at exit 32, just 11 miles north of the planned hospital in West Chester Township and only eight miles north of the Liberty Township Cincinnati Children's branch.

In addition to a new cancer center and chest pain center, among the amenities patients will have at the new Middletown location, scheduled to open by late 2007, is a private room where family members can stay overnight if they want.

"People can't always judge their (medical) care, but they can judge how they are treated," Oswald said.

Fort Hamilton recently completed an expansion, adding 20 beds, a hospice, a new intensive care unit and renovating the emergency department, operating rooms and inpatient rooms. The radiology department also converted from using film to completely digital technology.

In the past few years, administration has paid close attention to "patient throughput," said Senior Vice President Lynn Oswald.

One success has been reducing the door-to-door time of people in the ER by 42 percent, she said.

"Patients expect us to have high quality care, but they want all the amenities to go with it, too," Lynn Oswald said.

The hospital just added free valet parking, so visitors and patients don't have to fight to find parking or walk too far to enter the building.

## **Competition**

Despite a service area that includes West Chester Township, Sandy Oswald said she isn't worried about the new West Chester hospital taking business from Middletown Regional.

"Competition is good. It keeps everybody on their toes," she said. "This area is growing so exponentially. Cincinnati and Dayton suburbs are growing towards us. There will be plenty of business for everyone."

Much of the growth of the I-75 corridor from Cincinnati to Dayton is spilling over into Liberty and West Chester townships and the surrounding areas. Middletown Regional's move to I-75 reflects a strategic decision to tap into that growing resource, Sandy Oswald said.

Lynn Oswald at Fort Hamilton agreed that eastern Butler County would continue to grow as Cincinnati suburbs move out, but she doesn't feel threatened.

"Hamilton is large enough to support its own hospital," she said. "People don't want to travel for their health care. People don't want to drive into Cincinnati. They want their health care closer to home."

In some ways, the hospitals don't necessarily compete as much as they enhance one another, said West Chester Chamber Alliance President Joe Hinson.

"You have Children's focusing on children, UC doing something else. Mercy recently opened a new heart hospital, and I think each one has a speciality. One will enhance the other, and the real winners will be the residents," he said.

Mercy Fairfield Interim CEO Jeff Ashin said there is another aspect of competition among health care providers. The biggest problem facing the new facilities will be staffing. The human resource pool is not overwhelming at this point, he said, and the hospitals may find themselves competing for the same resources. But he isn't worried.

"Competition in health care is a reality," he said.

### **Residual effects**

At the turn of the century, several nursing schools in the region had classes that never reached capacity, O'Toole said. In the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of people in health care careers graduating, but there is a question of whether it will be enough to keep up with the need.

"I think it's going to be a challenge," O'Toole said. "I think there has been all along. But hospitals have been and will continue to look outside for human resources. There are some creative solutions."

Bringing in professionals from all over the nation and even the world is one way to meet the need. O'Toole cited a regional hospital that recently recruited nurses from the Philippines.

The technology these new hospitals will create, combined with the well-known names of the health care providers, will be enough to bring in the outside help, Hinson said.

"There will be jobs created with local talent, but these facilities will also bring in national and international workers," he said. "You're going to need highly educated, highly skilled employees to come to this area, and that will have a residual effect."

Although no one was willing to give estimates as to how many jobs could be created, the addition of potentially hundreds of health care personnel moving into the area will certainly have a positive impact on the housing market.

And as baby boomers head into retirement with so many excellent medical services in the area, they are more likely to stay in the area or even move in from surrounding regions.

The need for more health care professionals also provides an opportunity for the new educational institutions in and nearby West Chester Township to attract students, professors and create home-grown jobs.

"I would look at this as not only an opportunity for more skilled physicians to come into Butler County," Gillespie said. "I believe the opportunity for many of the advanced education organizations coming into the county to develop an appropriate workforce."

Contact **Cameron Fullam** at (513) 755-5127, or e-mail him at [cfullam@coxohio.com](mailto:cfullam@coxohio.com).