

Hospital location switched

Project will now be built north of 132 Avenue at 108 Street

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Peace Country Health today announced it is changing the location of its proposed new hospital and the authority's chairman says the province wants to make it a privately owned building.

The yet-to-be-named hospital is in the midst of planning stages and had been planned for a 40-acre (16-hectare) location south of 132 Avenue at 108 Street in the undeveloped northwest corner of the city, on land donated to the authority by the Evaskevich family in June 2006.

However, PCH chairman Marvin Moore said the health authority and Evaskevich's company, Alberta Lands, couldn't reach an agreement on development. Different opinions on road widening, and green space and subdivision of the land meant the authority couldn't accept the donated land after all, said Moore.

"We're now at the stage where our detailed planning needs to know the location," he said this morning.

The authority didn't have to go far to find a new site, however, as a second private land developer has stepped forward to donate a 40-acre parcel directly across the avenue on the north side of 132 Ave.

The land there is owned by local developer Henry Hamm of Dirham Construction Limited. Dirham Homes is one of the largest homebuilders in Grande Prairie.

At a special meeting Monday, the PCH board approved a motion to direct the health authority to enter into an agreement with Hamm.

Moore praised Hamm for the donation and keeping the hospital close to its original location.

"It's an excellent location and we've signed agreement already," he said, adding Hamm has agreed to extend utility services directly to the site at a value of roughly \$2 million.

The new site offers a southward facing slope for better direct sunlight exposure and has a more contained wetland.

When the hospital does break ground, however, it might not be the government that ends up owning the building. Moore confirmed that provincial Health and Infrastructure departments are pushing to have the hospital built as a P3 (Public-Private Partnership) project.

In such an arrangement, a private company fronts the cost for a new project, builds it and owns it with the province slowly leasing the project back over an extended period.

If approved in that format, it would be the first such P3 hospital in Alberta. The health care provided in the hospital would still be publicly funded and controlled.

"It may be the way to go, that will be dictated by the government," said Moore, who added the health authority will have no say in that decision.

Previously the government had committed \$250 million towards construction of the hospital, but Moore said that is essentially seed money and the total cost will likely be more than \$700 million.

"I'm not anxious to peg a cost, I'd rather just say what we need in terms of beds and so on."

Officials with PCH have recently toured British Columbia to see P3 facilities built by a provincially owned corporation and learn more about them.

Moore said he expects a decision from the Stelmach government on how the new hospital will be paid for within a few months.

The province has already approved an agreement that will see part of the Edmonton ring road, Anthony Henday Drive, built as a P3 project.

Moore said the idea of the hospital being privately owned doesn't worry him, he just wants action.

"I have no concerns about that aspect. I'd want to get it built right away, if a P3 delays that a year, I'm not for it, if a P3 speeds it up, OK."

The target opening of the hospital remains early 2011.