



A BRICK AND GLASS exterior will give a completely new appearance to the front of the expanded Rockbridge Area Health Center facing west, in the direction of U.S. 11, once the major renovation project is completed. (rendering by Architectural Partners)

Expanding Health

Health Center Readies \$6.6 Million Project

By Ed Smith

The Rockbridge Area Health Center will soon be breaking ground on a \$6.6 million renovation/expansion project that is to more than double the floor space of the medical facility.

The expansion plans will allow RAHC to respond to a rapidly rising caseload of patients. More than 5,100 patients made nearly 16,000 visits to the center last year – an increase of 35 percent over the preceding year.

Located in a former funeral home off of U.S. 11, north of Lexington, RAHC currently has about 10,000 square feet of floor space, all on one level. The addition, which includes a second floor on the west (front) and north sides of the building, is to add 13,000 square feet of floor space. A new entrance on the north

side of the building is to have a covered, handicapped accessible drop-off area for patients.

Construction is to be undertaken in four phases over a 17-month period. A trailer has been set up behind the building for the relocation of some offices temporarily. All services will continue to be offered during construction.

A \$1 million grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that was awarded to RAHC in 2015 is being used for the expansion. RAHC also received a \$50,000 grant from the United States Department of Agriculture, and has applied for a \$4.7 million USDA loan.

Four years after becoming a federally qualified community health center,

the former free clinic is continuing to fill in the gaps in health care coverage for Rockbridge area residents. By charging fees on a sliding-scale based on family income, the center is providing care for the insured and uninsured alike.

“We’re open to everyone,” notes CEO Suzanne Sheridan. “We’re still providing a significant amount of charity care. We serve the low-income and uninsured, those who have catastrophic plans with high deductibles as well as those who are [fully] insured.”

She says there are a number of reasons for the increase in demand for the center’s services. The number of uninsured local residents has increased. Several long-time family practice doc-

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THE FIRST-FLOOR plan for the Rockbridge Area Health Center depicts the reconfiguration of ground-level offices and patient rooms under a proposed expansion/renovation.

THE SECOND-FLOOR plan shows the location of a proposed new second floor on the front (west) and north sides of the building. Patient rooms and offices are depicted, as is a conference room.

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tors in the Rockbridge area retired in recent years and haven’t been replaced. Also, one local pediatrics office recently closed.

RAHC now has pediatrics and obstetrics among its services. Other offerings include dentistry and mental health services. The center has been adding to its staff. It now employs two family practice physicians, two pediatricians, two nurse practitioners and a certified nurse midwife. The center has a total of 52 full-time employees – up from 35 just two years ago.

Sheridan emphasized that the center is not competing with Carilion Stonewall Jackson Hospital in Lexington or Augusta Medical Center in Fishersville for patients, but rather, providing care for those who might otherwise go without services. “People need a place to access health care,” she explained. “[We have] a unique role in the local health care delivery systems that is vital to the health of communities ... [what is] typically regarded as the health care ‘safety-net.’”

According to Sheridan, “Expanding internal capacity by addressing health care gaps

in the community such as dental care, pediatrics and women’s health care will support future sustainability.”

The center is financed, she said, “through a mix of Medicaid and Medicare reimbursements [with different payment methodologies], direct patient revenue, other third-party payers [private insurers], state funding, local funding, philanthropic organizations and grant funding ...”

The \$6.6 million cost for what will essentially be a brand new 23,762-square-foot facility, she said, is consistent with what has

been spent elsewhere in the region on new community health center buildings, including Harrisonburg (2012), Roanoke (2012) and Nelson County (2011).

“In addition to [meeting] patient demand,” said Sheridan, “expanding services and [placing a greater] emphasis on patient education and population health, the new RAHC facility should be considered within the context of a physician shortage that looms over the nation, particularly for rural health settings.”