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Area officials ecstatic over plans for new Panama City Beach medical campus

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PANAMA CITY BEACH — Bay County Commissioner Philip "Griff" Griffiths says officials have discussed the need for a medical facility on the Beach as long as he can remember.

As a third generation resident and someone who's spent his entire life living along the Gulf of Mexico, Griffiths said it's exciting to see the project gain momentum.

The St. Joe Company on Thursday announced plans to build a health care campus in Panama City Beach with the help of Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare and Florida State University's College of Medicine.

"The simple fact that residents maybe will not have to travel outside the area to get quality medical care is really a benefit for everybody who lives within a few counties, not just Bay County," Griffiths said. "Those surrounding counties, right now, they all come to our hospitals anyhow ... so this is just one more piece to that puzzle."

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He added that it will be "amazing" because it will serve as a teaching hospital and draw more "young, critical-thinking doctors" to the area who will be the "future of the medical field."

The local addition also was something Mayor Mark Sheldon discussed during a Panama City Beach City Council meeting on Thursday.

"Today was a really big day for Panama City Beach," Sheldon said. "I'm overwhelmed and overexcited ... getting a hospital for Panama City Beach is something that's been crucial to many of us ... there's been many meetings and many hours spent to get to where we are today. Today's (announcement) is a giant step forward for Panama City Beach."

Like Griffiths, Sheldon added that the teaching aspect of the facility will have a massive impact on the area. A Beach medical facility also was something he campaigned for before his

election last April.

"It's not just going to be Tallahassee Memorial (HealthCare), it's also FSU's medical school," he said. "Panama City Beach will now become a destination for people (who) want ... to learn more about medicine. It's just a great opportunity for us."

The facility is planned to complement Latitude Margaritaville Watersound, a community for those 55 years old and older. It is being built along State 79 near its intersection with State 388 through a partnership between the St. Joe Company, Margaritaville Holdings and Minto Communities USA.

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Initial plans for the community call for 3,500 homes, which will start to hit the market in May. Officials hope people will begin to move in by the end of the year.

The health care campus will be on 87 acres near the intersection of State 79 and Philip Griffitts Sr. Parkway, formerly known as Bay Parkway and sometimes referred to as Back, Back Beach Road.

Initial plans for the development, which could break ground next year, call for an ambulatory and urgent care center. An emergency center and 100-bed inpatient medical center might be added in the future.

In addition to giving residents and visitors another local health care option, Becca Hardin, president of the Bay County Economic Development Alliance, said she believes it will be a huge draw for businesses interested in moving to the county.

Hardin also said the area's "medical situation" is a topic that is often discussed when her group recruits a new company. She called the new medical facility a "game changer."

"This is very important for this whole region of Florida," Hardin said. "Anytime that you can enhance your medical services, it's going to attract people because they'll feel safe. If they have an emergency, they've got options."