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LOCAL

Progress made on 'game-changing' medical campus project in Panama City Beach

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PANAMA CITY BEACH — For Becca Hardin, president of the Bay County Economic Development Alliance, having a hospital on the beach will be nothing short of "game-changing."

During the EDA's January investor's meeting Wednesday, officials gave an update on the upcoming health care campus slated to be built in Panama City Beach through a joint venture partnership between the St. Joe Co., Tallahassee Memorial Healthcare and Florida State University. The project was first announced in April last year.

"There are some game-changing projects that are happening in Bay County," Hardin said during the meeting. "There are many other examples (of this), but one ... is the new hospital complex that is being built on Highway 79 in Panama City Beach.

"We have seen the artist renderings of the campus and I'll tell you, it's impressive," she added. "It's going to be such a great (addition) not only for our community, but for the entire region."

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Andrew Starr, vice president of Tallahassee Memorial Healthcare, said there is no denying Bay County needs another hospital, especially considering the constant growth of the Panama City Beach area.

Information from the meeting notes that the hospital will sit just 7.5 miles from the Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport, which last year shattered its previous

annual passenger record from 2019.

The health care campus also will be located about 30 to 45 minutes from any nearby hospitals, including Gulf Coast Regional Medical Center, Ascension Sacred Heart Bay and Ascension Sacred Heart Hospital Emerald Coast.

"This area is growing by leaps and bounds, so ... you have all this opportunity (and) a need to build an infrastructure to support that opportunity here and now and more importantly, in the future," Starr said during Wednesday's meeting. "There's nothing but upwards momentum in this area."

The current goal of the project is to first build a medical office building to set up the fundamentals. The long-term vision then is for that to expand into a hospital that covers 320,000 square feet and boasts four medical office buildings and 500 beds.

Starr said a master agreement with St. Joe already is in place and a general contractor has been selected.

He hoped for the medical office building to open sometime in 2024.

"This is going to be a local facility," Starr said. "This facility will not be called TMH (Tallahassee Memorial Healthcare). That is not what we are intending to do. Most likely, it is going to be called FSU Health (because) it is a campus that belongs to this community.

"Yes, there will be a relationship (with TMH) but the reality is this is going to be (the residents') campus," he added. "There's a big difference between being part of a local organization that cares about community ... and being part of a bigger conglomerate."