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Medical school on Med Center Health campus 'on target'

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A monster-sized crane stretches skyward on the campus of Med Center Health just off the U.S. 31-W By-Pass in Bowling Green, a vivid reminder that The Medical Center and its various offshoots continue in construction mode.

Or maybe that crane, angling upward, is mimicking the growth curve of Med Center Health, which is approaching 4,000 total employees and is second only to Houchens Industries among southcentral Kentucky employers.

Tuesday, that growth was even more evident as a caravan of 70 cement trucks visited the site of the parking structure going up next to the medical school, which is being built as a partnership among Med Center Health, the University of Kentucky College of Medicine and Western Kentucky University.

As concrete was poured on the parking structure's third floor and the 70 or so Wehr Construction workers busied themselves smoothing the concrete and continuing work on the structure's next floor, UK, WKU and Med Center Health officials toured the site and examined the progress on a project that promises to change the landscape of both The Medical Center campus and the Bowling Green education and medical communities.

The 24,000-square-foot UK College of Medicine Bowling Green campus will occupy the second floor of a building that will connect to the five-level, 861-space parking structure. Both structures are being fast-tracked, with the medical school scheduled to open for the 2018 fall semester.

"We are on target," Med Center Health Executive Vice President Jean Cherry said of the \$28.3 million project. "They're working extra shifts. The construction crew, architects and engineers are really focused."

As are the academic types who will oversee the new medical school.

"We had a dream, and it's coming to fruition," said Don Brown, assistant dean of the UK College of Medicine Bowling Green campus.

Brown said his staff is moving quickly to fill the 30 spots in the medical school's first class.

"We've already had two rounds of interviews, and we have accepted 16 of the 30 spots," he said. "We're excited about the quality of the applicants."

Brown pointed out that UK and WKU are both making important contributions to this project.

"UK has been a very good strategic partner," he said. "From building the curriculum to the admissions process. A lot of people are investing in this project."

He said local physicians are on board with the goal of providing the best possible education for the medical students.

"We want everything to be done at a high standard," Brown said. "It will be very similar to the training they would get in Lexington. We will use local physicians to help with small-group instruction, especially with specialty-specific lectures."

Brown said the medical school will utilize teleconferences and other technologies in collaboration with UK's Lexington campus. He expects the medical school building to be ready in time for the 2018 fall semester, but he said WKU has a contingency plan to provide instruction until the building is complete.

Long-term, the medical school building could be expanded, Brown said.

"We'll have 30 students per class," he said. "But we don't think it will be long before we may need to increase that class size."

That fits well with the original goal of addressing the state's physician shortage, said UK College of Medicine Associate Dean Todd Cheever.

"This partnership gives the UK College of Medicine the opportunity to address the physician shortage in this part of the state," Cheever said. "One of the things we noticed on the main campus was that we had as many medical students as we could have. We're at capacity."

"Regional campuses like this will give us an opportunity to bring more Kentuckians into the medical school," he explained. "The hope is that they will become physicians for Kentucky."

Likewise, Cherry sees this project meeting the goal of training students who want to stay in the state to practice medicine. And she sees another side benefit.

"The public should be excited," she said. "This will fix our parking challenges."

It will fix much more, said WKU Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs Doug McElroy.

"It's amazing how quickly it's coming together," he said. "It has been seamless, with all the partners working well together."

"It's really going to provide a boost to this region in terms of health care but also economically and culturally. It will provide an opportunity for our students to transition to medical school without leaving town, and it will open new avenues for research further down the line."

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