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"Beautiful!" - public gets its chance to look into new hospital

(by M.T. Fernandes, Local Journalism Initiative)

The word "beautiful" summed it up for many visitors at the come and go event for the new Markdale hospital.

It was more than a 20-year journey to get to this point, a long wait for area residents.

"I hate to say it, but it's worth it - this is what we need," said Sharon Seeley, who was viewing the hospital with her husband Barry. "Impressive - extremely impressive."

Floor-to-ceiling windows in the waiting area had some saying that people might arrange coffee dates in the hospital for the beautiful view.

Seeing the huge counter at the coffee kiosk, Markdale Hospital Auxiliary veteran volunteer Dorothy Hill joked that the group may have to expand its menu to match.

At 90, she's been a volunteer for almost 30 years in the coffee shop. The Auxiliary has been a very significant fundraiser for the hospital over the years through many venues, including the Pennywise Shop.

Mrs. Hill said the hospital was beautiful. "I think we're going to have to shine our faces and comb our hair," she said of the prominent position of the cafe counter in the shiny new facility.

She spoke for the long-term community about the wait. "We couldn't do anything about it. We got discouraged. But here it is."

Many new residents in the growing area won't have known that history, but will pass through the doors of a brand new state-of-the-art facility, starting 6 a.m. on Sept. 24.

The hospital has been designated a scope centre for the region. The Minor Procedures area will open in the future, once staff are secured and trained. The scope service in Markdale was paused after 2020.

"I am just amazed this day has truly come," said Cheryl Batchelor, who worked many years at Markdale hospital.

She praised the attention to details like the heated sidewalk at the emergency entrance to provide safe footing in winter.

The hospital costs rose during the decades, and plans were adapted many times.

The building, for example, now has negative-air rooms and ante-rooms in the ambulance bays, in emerg and in an in-patient room for isolation.

There are four ambulance bays, but it is not a permanent ambulance station.

Significantly, a very large space in the hospital's lower level is reserved so that expansion can be done within the building.

Grey Highlands councillor Nadia Dubyk said that gives her "great confidence, to know that the hospital is going to serve us well for generations to come."

That lower level was something the local hospital foundation was committed to over the years, and which in turn was advocated for on a provincial level by GBHS.

When the first local fundraising campaign closed, surpassing its goal, it brought a sense of pride in the community accomplishment. When no progress was seen for years, many were discouraged and even angry.

Chair of the first campaign, local resident Dr. Hamilton Hall said that he always knew there would be a hospital sometime - "as long as we didn't hear 'no'."

"I never gave up hope that it was going to be here," he said. "I just gave up hope that it would be in my lifetime."

He also was honorary chair for the second campaign, held since not all pledges were collected (for many reasons, including the death of some donors).

Last Friday, he laughed as he remembered the original call from Dan Rose of Markdale, who told him heading the campaign it would only take a few weekends. "Here we are 22 years later."

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In that first successful campaign, the public was to raise \$12.5 million. The goal was met, but many years later, just \$6.8 million of the pledged amount was in place.

The second campaign goal was \$5.7 million, but raised \$8 million. The money was for the hospital, but also so that future health care will be more secure, said the chair of the second campaign.

"The community, from south to north to east to west, all were hugely supportive," said Together in Care campaign chair Harvey Fraser.

"We can't say enough about the community that made it possible." The hospital serves the largest physical area in Brightshores, the new label for GBHS.

"You never stop raising money for health care," he commented, mentioning that hopes are a CAT-scan is in the hospital's future.

Local foundation CEO Darlene Lamberti, at the centre of local fundraising for health care, took delight in pointing out a very prominent wall of sponsors, large and small, opposite the kiosk area.

The clear panels are mounted over a background of landscape photographs, one from each of the four municipalities served. It was a popular stop with visitors.

She was pleased with the turnout, although she said a last-minute decision for the public event didn't

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give a lot of time to get the word out.

What comments was she hearing? "It's beautiful," she said. "Everyone's very happy."

Pamela Ellis of the Markdale area was one of many who dropped in. She liked the bright and fresh interior compared with the old hospital, but still couldn't understand the drop in the number of beds from the old hospital.

That number, seven, went up from four at first approval, and CEO Gary Sims has told this newspaper previously that there will be opportunity in the future to make the case for more beds. There is also a palliative bed.

The rooms include full bathrooms for each patient, and are "hotel room-sized" and not just "holding beds," a campaign member said. There's a mechanical lift over each bed.

In-patient bed numbers weren't bothering Barb and John Hotson, who live on a farm near Walter's Falls.

Length of hospital stays are declining, Mrs. Hotson observed. "My sister had open heart surgery yesterday and they're sending her home in two days."

Their thoughts on the new hospital - "it's beautiful," and, "I couldn't believe they did it in two years."

The hospital build went smoothly, in difficult times for construction projects, passing through its various goals for the different phases on time.

The beds will accommodate people moving closer to home and family for

a few more days after time at a larger centre. Meanwhile, the ambulatory care area is much expanded.

Grey Highlands Deputy Mayor Dane Nielsen was on hand to greet visitors and hear their reactions.

"It's one thing to have the Province, and the premier come to celebrate," he reflected. "But today is to celebrate what the community did."

Campaign member Heather Torry, a long-time Markdale nurse, was guiding people through the open hallway down from the registration cafe lobby.

She commented that the closing of the old hospital is the end of a place with memories for many people. Staff will be having their last potluck meal next week. It will probably be the scene of a lot of reminiscing.

Many community members have memories of the hospital as well, of course.

Some of those memories occurred to Evelyn Lyons as she toured the new building with two of her sons. She shared that Leroy was born in the old hospital 60 years ago.

The hospital is a fresh sight today, but will become familiar to many, as it serves a large region.

That's a point Dr. Hall said he made frequently over the years to advocate for the build. "It's the only hospital on Hwy. 10 between Orangeville and Owen Sound."

But on Friday, as people left the hospital with smiling faces, on their way to claim their complimentary local ice cream treat, it was no longer a time to "sell" the hospital.

It was a time to celebrate.

Regards

Paul & Gail