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Commissioners approve employee health clinic

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By Howard Roden

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Montgomery County commissioners gave the go-ahead Monday to construct an employee health clinic they say will save the county millions each year.

The clinic, to be built at an approximate cost of \$700,000, will be located adjacent to the Alan B. Sadler Commissioners Court Building that is currently under construction at the intersection of Phillips and Thompson in downtown Conroe.

A county-owned clinic has been considered for the past 2-1/2 years, said Dennis McMahon, director of Risk Management.

"As the cost of health care continually increases, we're looking for ideals to stem costs," he said.

The county's self-funded health program spent \$18 million in employees costs in 2008, McMahon said. Employees contributed approximately \$1.2 million in premiums last year.

In March, commissioners hired CareHere!, a Nashville, Tenn.-based company, to manage the clinic, as well as other aspects of the county's health program. CareHere! has projected savings in excess of \$2.143 million during the first three years of operating Montgomery County's health care for its 3,200 employees, dependents and retirees.

"We expect to save county taxpayers \$1.1 million to \$1.2 million a year," County Judge Alan B. Sadler said after Commissioners Court Monday. He believes the county-owned clinic, in conjunction with CareHere!'s philosophy, will allow the county to recoup its construction costs on the building within seven months of operation.

"And that doesn't count the lost hours saved from a doctor's visit," Sadler said.

"We're trying to find ways to reduce expenses and minimize costs," Precinct 2 Commissioner Craig Doyal said. "We're not giving away health care, but we attempting to curb the costs because we are self-insured."

Design plans for the clinic call for construction of a 5,000-square-foot facility with on-site parking. Sadler said the primary question as to what type of building county leaders want to construct on that site.

"We want to build something of a short-to-medium term of 7-12 years," he said, adding that the county might need to build an even larger building by then."

However, Precinct 3 Commissioner Ed Chance said he prefers a more "permanent" structure, something that would last 15 to 30 years.

Energy savings: Commissioners approved application for a \$3.2 million U.S. Department of Energy block grant that would fund a number of energy efficient projects at county facilities.

More than half the funds will pay for the installation of new heating and air conditioning units atop four buildings – the Montgomery County Courthouse, the Ed Chance South County Annex, the Lone Star Convention Center and the county's new Emergency Management Operations center, currently under construction out at the Lone Star Executive Airport.

Other projects targeted for the block grant include a pilot solar project that would generate 10 kilowatts of power, said Juanita Stanley, of the county's Infrastructure Department.

"We haven't decided on the building for this project because we have to determine which roof can hold the weight of the system," she said.

Funds also will be used to retrofit lighting systems in county buildings, as well as conduct an energy audit of all county buildings older than five years, Stanley said.

"We project annual savings of at least 20 percent for the buildings involved in these projects," she said.

MHMR funds: Commissioners approved \$255,000 in the county's Community Development Block Grant funds for construction costs of the Tri-County Mental Health Mental Retardation's crisis stabilization unit.

The 12-to-16 bed facility, which will be built adjacent to Lone Star Community Health Center on Montgomery Road in Conroe, will provide around-the-clock psychiatric care to patients for up to 14 days.

The funds presented Monday are from the Community Development's 2008 fiscal year, and represent a portion of the \$1.5 million committed by the county toward building the unit. The facility will serve patients in Montgomery, Liberty and Walker counties.

Construction is expected to begin this fall.

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