

St. E's: too fast, or what doc ordered?

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

To some residents of Allston-Brighton, a planned \$30 million expansion of Caritas St. Elizabeth's Medical Center - including a new access road, the addition of two floors to the main parking garage, and a new, three-story emergency department - is too big, too intrusive, and is happening too quickly. But for hospital officials and residents who support the project, it's just what the neighborhood needs, and is all being done by the book.

A community task force has been meeting since September. But many neighbors aired their concerns during a workshop organized by the Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation last month. It included a presentation of the hospital's plans by Heather Knopsnyder, the nonprofit's open-space organizer.

In a later interview, Mark Tarlton, vice president of facilities and support services for St. Elizabeth's, rejected the assertion that decisions have been made behind closed doors, or that a helipad is part of the hospital's immediate plans, even though possible sites for one are specifically mentioned in project documents on the hospital's website. He did acknowledge, though, that the new emergency department building is being designed to support additional floors, if and when the hospital should want to expand.

FULL TEXT

CORRECTION: 4/16/2007 Correction: Because of a reporting error, a City Weekly story April 1 on a neighborhood workshop to discuss the planned expansion of Caritas St. Elizabeth's Medical Center misidentified the workshop's organizer. It was the Allston Brighton Community Planning Initiative, of which the Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation is a member.

CITY WEEKLY / BOSTON NEIGHBORHOODS / BRIGHTON

To some residents of Allston-Brighton, a planned \$30 million expansion of Caritas St. Elizabeth's Medical Center - including a new access road, the addition of two floors to the main parking garage, and a new, three-story emergency department - is too big, too intrusive, and is happening too quickly. But for hospital officials and residents who support the project, it's just what the neighborhood needs, and is all being done by the book.

A community task force has been meeting since September. But many neighbors aired their concerns during a workshop organized by the Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation last month. It included a presentation of the hospital's plans by Heather Knopsnyder, the nonprofit's open-space organizer.

No one at the meeting seemed to dispute the need for a new parking garage, or a replacement for the emergency department, which is more than 50 years old and operating at 50 percent above its intended capacity. But other aspects of the project, such as the access road, which would cut through green space on the campus, and the

siting of the emergency department at Washington and Cambridge streets, where it would take the place of a grassy slope, were criticized.

The task force, said resident Julie Handley, a social worker who once briefly worked at the hospital, never challenged the location of the road or the emergency department, which was chosen over seven other sites on the campus.

"They challenged aspects of the development that would go on with the project underway, but they didn't challenge the locations," she said. "They accepted St. Elizabeth's reasoning behind everything."

Not true, said Paul Berkeley, a lifelong Allston resident who chaired the task force, in a later interview.

"There were all these practical issues around why this particular site had been chosen that convinced those of us who attended all 13 meetings," he said. Disagreeing with the decision, he added, is "their choice, but I think the people that looked at all this material and listened to the explanations were satisfied that this was the only practical site where they could put it."

Another attendee at the ABCDC meeting suggested that the hospital was less than forthcoming about its long-term goals, which could include adding four floors to the emergency department, and perhaps a helipad.

"They didn't really want to discuss that they eventually want to put a bigger building there, and potentially have a helipad and a helicopter coming in, which would be much more disruptive to the neighborhood," said Mark Alexakos, a child psychiatrist who works at the nearby Franciscan Hospital for Children.

But in a later interview, Mark Tarlton, vice president of facilities and support services for St. Elizabeth's, rejected the assertion that decisions have been made behind closed doors, or that a helipad is part of the hospital's immediate plans, even though possible sites for one are specifically mentioned in project documents on the hospital's website. He did acknowledge, though, that the new emergency department building is being designed to support additional floors, if and when the hospital should want to expand.

"Nothing has been asked for, nothing has been approved, and there is nothing on our radar screen right now," he said. "Now, let's fast-forward to six or seven or eight years from now: 'Hey, geez, we want to do this, and here's a good place, it makes sense for it to be on top of this building, and we could vertically expand it.' We are foundationing it to be able to do something in the future."

To those who already have doubts about the project and the approval process, and who believe their voices haven't been heard, such comments about what might be built down the road are of small comfort.

"I don't know what's going to happen, but I know it's a done deal," said Jean Dooley, a lifelong Brighton resident who worked at the hospital for 10 years. "I think that they should start to listen to the people in the community. They're not letting us know what's going to happen 10, 20, 30 years down the road."

Comments to the Boston Redevelopment Authority on the master plan were due by Tuesday. If the project is approved, construction could begin as early as April 30.

Credit: Will Kilburn Globe Correspondent. Boston Globe

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