



Chip Johnson

[Archive](#) | [E-mail](#) | [RSS](#)

In Oakland, Highland Hospital's face-lift begins

Chip Johnson

Tuesday, June 7, 2011

Most East Bay residents with jobs and health plans never see the inside of a public hospital, but few realize that's where they will be taken in the event of a life-threatening accident or injury.

Highland Hospital in Oakland, a county hospital that is the regional trauma center, served more than 85,000 patients last year, including more than 2,500 trauma patients.

"If you're in an accident and paramedics think you meet the criteria, this is where they're going to bring you," said Ann Ludwig, the project manager for a long-awaited face-lift at Highland's 14-acre campus. "It's the best chance to save your life."

Alameda County officials broke ground Friday to signal the start of a \$668 million construction project to replace the medical center's earthquake-damaged main hospital, a nine-story, 236-bed facility in the center of the campus on East 31st Street in East Oakland. Its replacement was mandated by tough new state seismic standards placed on hospital construction.

The project also includes the construction of a clinic facility that will house urgent and cardiac care, respiratory therapy and infusion, hematology and oncology departments.

It's the largest construction project ever undertaken by the county.

The public hospital, which receives about \$80 million in taxpayer funding annually, is also the largest teaching hospital in the East Bay. UCSF's four-year general surgery residency program is based there. In addition, more than 65 percent of the medical practitioners in the Bay Area have received some training at Highland, Ludwig said.

The new facility, called the Acute Care Tower, will be the final installment of an improvement project begun almost a decade ago to upgrade the 84-year-old facility. A new emergency department opened in 2005 and includes office space for pediatrics. The remaining space in the clinic will be used to expand its network of satellite clinics geared to Spanish-speaking and low-income residents in East Oakland and in Newark for residents living in the southern end of Alameda County.

"For the uninsured and underinsured, it's very difficult for low-income people to get access to good health care," Ludwig said. "The county's long-term plan at Highland is to be able to serve our population with specialty clinic service and provide across-the-board services for people who need it," she said.

When all the work is completed in 2017, a total of six buildings at the site will be demolished and two new structures will be built. A new facade for the hospital's main entrance will also be built as well as a center courtyard, a nod to its original design scheme.

While it admittedly took longer, and cost over \$100 million more than originally planned, county officials were methodical in their efforts to bring the project to fruition and managed to plan the project without asking for new taxes to do it - and that's rare in this place and in these tough economic times. The bonds approved to finance the project will largely be paid for with funds collected from state tobacco taxes.

County officials are hopeful that the new upgrades will not only extend quality health care to low-income residents, but also attract new patients to choose the hospital as their primary care provider.

"With the prospect of new jobs and by providing state-of-the-art health services we want to make Highland a hospital of choice that can compete with some of the private hospital facilities in the Bay Area," said Alameda County Supervisor Nate Miley.

Chip Johnson's column appears in the Chronicle on Tuesday and Friday. E-mail him at chjohnson@sfgate.com.