NIU building proton therapy clinic

West Chicago cancer treatment facility that would be 1st of its kind in state is scheduled to be completed in 2 years

By James Kimberly

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Northern Illinois University broke ground Thursday for a $160 million proton therapy cancer treatment center in West Chicago, a project that will be the first of its kind in Illinois and one the school plans to build in less than two years.

If the college meets its aggressive construction deadline—it hopes to treat its first patient by March 1, 2010—it would be a record time for such a complex project. Once built, the center will provide better treatment for pediatric and certain types of soft-tissue cancers in adults who now have to travel far away for treatment, oncologists say.

Officials from NIU say they are up to the challenge.

"We're right at or slightly ahead of schedule," said John Lewis, associate vice president for administration and university outreach. "We have a lot of people working very hard to meet that 24-month schedule."

NIU, which is building the center in the DuPage National Technology Park, is under such a tight construction timeline because of the unusual way it received state approval. When seeking permission from the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board, NIU requested an exemption from the state board's regulation on the grounds it was a university, not a health facility.
The school received approval to build—a certificate of exemption from the board's regulation—but it came with the caveat that the facility open within 24 months.

It's not clear what would happen if NIU fails to do so. However, health board rules do say that if an applicant fails to complete a project within 24 months, the certificate of exemption expires and cannot be extended.

That has never happened before, an Illinois Department of Public Health spokesman said, and officials were unwilling to speculate.

DuPage County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom said the project will spur more development for the park.

"This facility will help bring jobs to the DuPage Technology Park," Schillerstrom said. "That, in turn, will bring more businesses to the park and will create even more jobs."

The project also will benefit cancer patients in Illinois, who currently have to travel to Bloomington, Ind.; Jacksonville; Houston; Boston; or Loma Linda, Calif., for the treatment.

Proponents of proton therapy say it is the most effective way to deliver radiation treatment to sensitive tissues because proton beams can be more precise than other methods, enabling doctors to use lower dosages and causing fewer side effects.

"This is a glorious day," said Cherilyn Murer, chairman of the NIU board of trustees. "This is a true collaboration of science, medicine and education."

Lewis said construction crews will begin moving earth on the site within the week. Construction will benefit from years of preplanning that went into the design, Lewis said.

The Northwestern Medical Faculty Foundation will be the center's provider of clinical services.

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