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The End of an Era – Bringing Down a Hospital

Demolition of St. John's Mercy in Joplin now underway

JOPLIN, Mo. – The battered St. John's Mercy Hospital saw its first wrecking ball Sunday – a small step in a demolition process that will eventually bring down the tornado-ravaged buildings on the site and leave the land ready for rebuilding.

"It's hard to say goodbye to the building that has been St. John's since 1968," said Gary Pulsipher, president of St. John's Mercy. "But like the rest of the city, we are glad to be moving ahead and looking to the future. While we will never forget what happened here, taking down the hospital is another step in the process of removing the visible signs of the tornado's devastation from the landscape."

In all, there are five buildings across 47 acres – totaling more than 1.2 million square feet – that are being demolished and cleared. The largest building by far is the hospital, standing 162 feet high with approximately 750,000 square feet. There are also three medical office buildings and a rehabilitation facility that will be torn down.

Bringing down a hospital

Typically the easiest way to bring down a building of this size is by implosion. However, that's not possible in this case due to old lead mines beneath the ground.

"Joplin traces its roots back to the early miners who settled here in the late 1800s," said Dan O'Connor, demolition project manager. "As is the case in many places throughout the city, those mines were filled in to make way for growth. While they can be made safe to build on, we don't want to take any chances that demolition charges and crashing debris could create an uplift pressure that might cause damage to surrounding properties."

Instead, wrecking balls and specialized grappling equipment that reaches up to 15 stories high will take down the hospital towers. The demolition process is expected to take six weeks.

Taking care in tearing down

Crews started work in late December on building abatement, clean out and salvage. A team from Mercy searched the hospital to retrieve any keepsakes in good condition including bibles, artwork, memorial plaques, stained glass and marble. They even recovered three time capsules from the property. One buried when the hospital was built in 1968, one when the east tower was completed in the 1980s and one that marked St. John's 100th anniversary in 1996.

As for the building materials, every effort is being made to take as little to the landfill as possible. The steel, aluminum and copper in the buildings is being salvaged and recycled. The mountains of concrete and asphalt – created from tearing down the buildings and pulling up parking lots – will be crushed into small pieces and used as engineered backfill to make the land ready for redevelopment.

"The devastation from the tornado was bad enough," said John Farnen, Mercy's executive director of planning, design and construction. "We really want to take all the measures possible to care for



this site throughout the demolition process. It's our hope that by doing this, the area will once again be as vibrant and useful as it was before the tornado."

Other pieces of the hospital are being salvaged for a real-life science project of sorts. Many windows and pieces of plastic piping from the sprinkler system have been saved so they can undergo testing to see how they weathered the storm. It's knowledge that's hard to gain outside of a situation like this one.

Once the buildings are down and sites are cleared, Mercy will go to work to restore the land. When crews are done, the ground will be graded, seeded and ready for redevelopment. Mercy has already donated 12 acres to the Joplin school district for a new elementary school that will replace two schools destroyed in the tornado. Construction on that project is set to begin in May 2012.

"By this summer, the site will be cleared and new construction will have begun," said Pulsipher. "As we begin work on a new hospital, we are also glad to support other rebuilding efforts in our community."

Following the demolition ceremony, a four-foot tall cross that was recovered from the emergency department waiting room was mounted on a truck bed and led the way from the demolition site to the new hospital site for the second part of the dual demolition/groundbreaking ceremony.

"The cross certainly has some scars on it," said Terry Wachter, St. John's vice-president of mission. "But they just add character. Many of the pieces we've recovered will be placed in a tornado memorial museum or relocated to the new hospital when it's completed."

The new hospital will be located at the intersection of I-44 and Main in Joplin, just about three miles south of the old hospital. Following the procession, ground was broken and blessings were said over the new hospital site.

"By rebuilding our hospital, our schools and our community in Joplin, we set in motion a new Joplin landscape," said Lynn Britton, president and CEO of Mercy. "We will find innovative ways to serve Joplin and continue to provide compassionate, patient-centered care."

The new hospital, slated for completion in early 2015, will be built with 327 inpatient beds to support the region with a planned expansion of up to 424 beds. The plans include beds for medical/surgical care, critical care, women's/children's services (labor, delivery, recovery and postpartum rooms), behavioral health and rehabilitation.

Mercy is the eighth largest Catholic health care system in the U.S. and serves more than 3 million people annually. Mercy includes 31 hospitals, more than 200 outpatient facilities, 38,000 co-workers and 1,500 integrated physicians in Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma. Mercy also has outreach ministries in Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. For more about Mercy, visit www.mercy.net.

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