

**EDITORIAL**

# New hospital will change city's face, but planning crucial

**W**hen Middle Tennessee Medical Center opens a new hospital in 2010 on Thompson Lane in west Murfreesboro, it will change the face of the city's Gateway.

This stretch of land that only a few years ago was nothing but open fields is already becoming a retail and corporate center as part of Murfreesboro City Council's Gateway Center, a 300-acre development that sprang from the city's \$12 million land purchase.

With state approval Thursday of the request for hospital construction, the \$278 million facility to go up off Medical Center Parkway could be considered one of the biggest developments in the city's history. Not only will it dramatically change the landscape on that once-bucolic corner, it will spawn a medical corridor in that section of the city.

Murfreesboro Medical Clinic is already planning to move to Medical Center Parkway, and as development continues, doctors' offices and medical-related businesses will fill the area.

It will be a far cry from the beginning of the old Rutherford Hospital on University Street in 1927. Since St. Thomas bought the hospital and renamed it Middle Tennessee Medical Center in 1986, it has changed dramatically, building a new entrance on Highland Avenue along with Baptist Women's Pavilion, a cancer treatment center and ambulatory clinic.

Clearly, though, it has outgrown its neighborhood just east of downtown Murfreesboro. Not only can it not offer the 286 beds licensed by the state, parking is a growing problem and the hospital is simply boxed in on every side.

With Rutherford County's population steadily rising, MTMC had little choice but to expand, or be left behind. It will have 600,000 square feet, as opposed to its current 368,000 square feet.

Competition is a factor, as well, with StoneCrest Medical Center opening in Smyrna. But the need for MTMC to move and expand probably has little to do with the arrival of a new hospital in northern Rutherford County.

Indeed, we wouldn't be surprised to see another major medical facility arrive in Murfreesboro within a decade, simply because of the growth expected to take place here. Not only is the population aging, it is growing — rapidly — and could double from roughly 210,000 in the next 20 years.

MTMC must grow to meet that coming demand. But it also must provide better access, and the location near I-24 will allow people to get off at Medical Center Parkway and be at the hospital's front door in no time, instead of driving through central Murfreesboro.

At the same time, city leaders need to be prepared for the congestion that will follow complete development of Medical Center Parkway. With numerous retail and corporate developments in the works, planners must ask themselves if that road will be able to handle the traffic.

MTMC's presence in west Murfreesboro near I-24 will make a huge difference for the region's health-care system. It will create a new identity for the city's entrance.

But if traffic makes the area impassable, we have to wonder if it will improve our quality of life as much as we'd like to think.

