

Hearing next week on Cowles' cancer center

Medical College opposing certificate of need

By Cari Gervin
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When Tom Roberts was diagnosed with prostate cancer two years ago, he felt himself lucky.

Not to have cancer, of course. But Roberts felt lucky that his radiation therapy didn't make him very sick.

"In my case it wasn't too difficult ... I was in good enough shape to drive myself," the now fully recovered Roberts said in his Reynolds Plantation home last weekend.

Every day, five days a week, for six weeks, Roberts drove to Covington, sometimes Conyers, for radiation treatments. Although the treatments lasted just a minute or two, Roberts had a drive that lasted over an hour, each way, not to mention the time spent in the waiting

room.

And Roberts is hardly alone.

Arne Lassen, another Reynolds resident and prostate cancer survivor, said he had a harder time with the drive.

"It makes you weak and then you have to get someone else to drive you," Lassen explained. "Imagine that being right here ... What a relief that would have been."

Dr. Robert Cowles has. He imagined a cancer center just down the road from Reynolds, as part of his own medical campus. He persuaded Atlanta Oncology Associates to build a state-of-art-facility with a radiation therapy treatment facility.

Then the Medical College of Georgia Health System (MCG) and Oconee Regional Medical Center (ORMC) stepped in, leaving some area residents

furious that their hope for nearby cancer treatment might be quashed.

The State of Georgia requires medical facilities to get a Certificate of Need (CON) for the development and expansion of health care services and facilities.

Atlanta Oncology applied for a CON to offer radiation therapy last winter. Despite opposition from MCG, ORMC, and radiation therapy centers in Athens, Conyers and Covington, the state granted the certificate on April 8, 2004.

MCG and ORMC appealed the decision, saying that a new treatment center is not necessary, and next Tuesday, the state will hold a hearing to determine whether or not there will be radiation therapy at Lake Oconee.

Cowles said that the radiation therapy is necessary because of the rapidly growing - and rapidly aging - population in the lake area.



An aerial photograph of the Cowles Clinic. Next week state officials will decide if Lake Oconee needs a cancer center.

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Cancer center

from the Front

"One of the major problems with people in this age group is cancer. It is not compassionate healthcare to make them drive an hour when they may have nausea, vomiting and other side effects," Cowles said.

But Brian Riddle, the CEO of Oconee Regional Medical Center, said that when services are duplicated, there is not enough business to sustain two programs.

"We've been providing radiation therapy for 30 years in Milledgeville," he said.

Riddle said that because ORMC's focus is based in its service center - Baldwin, Putnam and Greene Counties - they would be better able to serve the community than a group based out of Atlanta.

Riddle admitted that ORMC has been considering building its own radiation therapy center at Lake Oconee for three years, but hasn't thought the volume of patients would be enough to sustain the cost.

"We have a strong desire to expand our presence in the area," Riddle said. "The problem we've had is that it hasn't seemed feasible because the

population isn't big enough yet."

ORMC withdrew its appeal on December 30. Riddle said they chose to withdraw due the growing cost of their legal fees.

"But we have lent MCG moral support and supporting documents. Were it not for the cost we would be an active party," Riddle said.

The CON application and supporting documentation provided by Atlanta Oncology Associates, on file at the Department of Community Health in Atlanta, admitted that ORMC would be hurt the most by a new radiation therapy facility. The CON application estimated that ORMC could lose as much as 15 percent of its annual radiation therapy treatments.

MCG officials declined to comment for this story after originally saying they would issue a written statement. Deborah Humphrey, the Director of Public Relations for MCG Health, said in an email that she was not at liberty to comment because "the issue is evolving and we're at a sensitive juncture."

But two letters in the CON documents explain some of MCG's reasoning.

In a letter from Don Snell, the President and CEO of MCG Health System, dated February 2, 2004, he said that the establishment of a cancer center by Atlanta Oncology would adversely affect MCG's relationships with the Greene-Morgan-Putnam Health network.

Then, in a letter dated March 3, 2004, Snell detailed his opposition to the cancer center in a more extensive fashion.

Snell criticized the fact that Atlanta Oncology is only proposing a three percent commitment to indigent care, since the rate of the poor and the uninsured are much higher in the region.

"In locating the facility [by Lake Oconee], AOA would essentially be skimming more affluent patients leaving the more indigent patients in surrounding counties to seek care from existing providers," Snell wrote.

Snell also said that the facility would not serve enough cases and would adversely

affect the patient volume at MCG.

MCG opened its own medical care facility two weeks ago, offering primary, specialty and urgent care - just down the road from the Cowles Clinic. The clinic was developed in collusion with Reynolds Plantation, as was the Cowles Clinic.

It does not offer any oncology, as of yet.

Cowles said the patient volume in Augusta, 84 miles away, would hardly be affected.

"This is not a competition with them. We just want quality healthcare for the people who live here," Cowles explained. "Not only do I believe it, but the state believes it. That is why they approved our CON in the beginning."

Cowles said he was confident his CON will be upheld on appeal.

Although the Greene County Board of Commissioners also originally opposed the project, they now stand behind Cowles and Atlanta Oncology.

According to District Four

This is not a competition with them. We just want quality healthcare for the people who live here.

- Robert Cowles

Commissioner Bud Sanders, to the radiation therapy center. the opposition was simply a stalling tactic, as the county was in negotiations with another cancer center at the time. When those negotiations broke down last spring, the county removed its opposition

"We are 100 percent in support now," Sanders said on Tuesday

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