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Aug. 26, 2009 | Susan Valot | KPCC

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Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian is moving into Irvine. The non-profit health care company officially broke ground today on its new Hoag Hospital Irvine facility. It's actually the old Irvine Regional Hospital and Medical Center, which closed earlier this year. KPCC's Susan Valot went to the groundbreaking to find out why Hoag thinks the middle of a recession is the right time to rebuild a hospital.



Susan Valot/KPCC

Susan Valot: The building looks the same from the outside. Palm trees line a circular driveway in front of the main doors, where drivers can drop off and pick up patients. But right now there are no patients – only the sound of construction.

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[sound of hammering in hospital]

Valot: Workers just got their demolition permits this month to gut parts of the inside of the hospital. They'll spruce up patient rooms. They'll enlarge the operating rooms. And they'll add high-tech touches that weren't here before.

Robert Braithwaite is the chief administrative officer of Hoag Hospital Irvine. He says Hoag jumped at the opportunity when Tenet Healthcare decided to let its lease on the hospital expire.

Robert Braithwaite: And we've always been present here. We take care of about 40 percent of the inpatient needs for the city already – a significant portion of it. And when the facility started to look like it was becoming available, this really allowed us to deepen our scope of services here in Irvine. We've been thinking about it in the past, but really never had the opportunity to provide a hospital.

Valot: Irvine has a population of more than 200,000, and growing. Irvine Regional was the one full-service hospital in town, but for the 18 years it's been open, it's struggled. Now, in the worst recession in a generation and with health care in flux, Hoag decides it's time to take over a hospital.

So why will the Irvine facility run any better with Hoag in charge? Richard Afable, Hoag's president, says for one thing, it's not a publicly-traded company, but instead a non-profit with a mission to serve the public.

Richard Afable: Our goal is not to run a financially successful hospital. Our goal is to be a financially and fiscally viable, sustainable facility and place where this community can receive care.

Valot: Hoag plans to trim costs down the road by investing in cutting-edge technology now. One of those high-tech tools is a robot known as RP7. Robert Braithwaite says only about 200 hospitals in the world use the robot, which he says will save money.

Braithwaite: A physician on his PC or her PC, from her office, can actually remote in. It has optics on the robot that are 10 times the optics on a human eye. It can pick up all the vital signs. It can interact live over broadband. And so it's really great to be able to bring in a specialist who might be otherwise occupied in his office, with patients, but the nursing staff needs that specialist right now.

Valot: Hoag already uses that technology at its main Newport Beach facility. That facility has a stellar reputation for specialties, including heart care. Braithwaite says the Irvine hospital aims to be a solid, general acute-care facility, but with a couple of specialties itself.

Braithwaite: One will be our orthopedic program at Hoag. It's, quite frankly, it's out of space. We need to grow it. It's – we see in the community a demographic that would warrant more orthopedic services. And so that will be truly an area where we will let our orthopedic service blossom.

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Valot: Braithwaite says the Irvine hospital will also focus on cardiology, another health condition that'll be more prevalent as the population in south Orange County ages. The new hospital with 152 beds is due to open in August of next year.

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STAFF PICK

Pamela Gurstein

Stanley's Restaurant

13817 Ventura Boulevard, Sherman Oaks

Whenever asked what is a really good restaurant in the valley, I always say "Stanley's." I have been going there since the time they opened, which is about 25 years. When they first started they were known for their Chinese Chicken Salad, but grew relatively fast to have a menu that has everything on it, and is very reasonably priced. The portions are huge and you will never walk out of there hungry.

There is something there for everyone. The service is as good as their food. The ambience of the whole restaurant is very relaxing and the art work on the walls, which is forever changing, is incredible. I am a fan for life! Try it, you'll like it!

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