

HEALTH

New five-story \$150 million cardiac center could break through Naples height barrier



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The NCH Healthcare System is inching closer to the possibility of building a standalone five-story heart center in Naples.

The Planning Advisory Board for the city of Naples on Friday added draft language to one of the city's zoning categories, the public services district, that would allow a hospital as a conditional use.

All specifics of any hospital project, including the height for a new cardiac center, would require the approval of the Naples City Council.

The nonprofit NCH, the largest hospital system in Collier County, has been working for more than a year on plans to build a state-of-the-art cardiac center adjacent to its Downtown Baker Hospital where its Telford Education Center is located. The price tag for the heart center is \$150 million.

The three-story Telford building would be torn down for the new five-story heart center that is proposed to be 75 feet tall. That would be well above the 42-foot height limit for commercial buildings in the city that was established in 2000 by a voter referendum.

NCH officials say the five-story complex at 75 feet is necessary to operate a heart center efficiently in one building and to attract top notch cardiac specialists. It also would be optimal for the patient experience, according to Paul Hiltz, president and chief executive officer of NCH.

What's been at issue for the project and has caused considerable debate among city residents

is the 42-foot height limit for commercial buildings, which some residents say needs to be enforced.

Others argue the benefit of the NCH project justifies finding a way to work around the 42-foot building height limit.

NCH's Baker hospital is just under 93 feet in height and was built decades before the building height limit was adopted. The entire hospital campus that involves 22 acres in the residential area between Fourth Avenue North and Second Avenue North now has three zoning classifications.

What the next step?

The idea of using the public services district zoning for NCH and the heart center developed this past spring. There are no permitted uses in the public services district; instead everything is a conditional use that must be approved by the city council.

By a 7-0 vote, the planning board on Friday is recommending to the city council that it add a hospital as another conditional use in the public services district.

The planning board added a definition that it must be a community hospital that is locally governed and not for profit.

Bruce Selfon, chairman of the planning board, said what the planning board is doing is "creating a path forward" for NCH to pursue the heart project.

The planning board on Friday was not considering or taking action on any of elements of the proposed five-story heart center or new parking garage that also is planned.

The next step is for the city council to formally add a hospital as a conditional use in the public services district.

The city council meets June 13 and June 15 yet the item was not included in either meeting agenda as of Friday.

If the city council goes forward with adding a hospital in the public services district, NCH needs to submit an application to be rezoned into the public services district, said Jack Ullrich, executive director of corporate real estate and construction at NCH.

The hospital system also would need to present the detailed plans for the five-story heart center, including at the proposed 75 feet in height, to the planning board and ultimately to

the city council for a vote.

Hiltz thanked the planning board Friday for its work.

“We look forward to the next step,” he said.

What would the heart center offer?

NCH has developed a broad outline of what the five-story heart center would offer. Currently NCH’s cardiac care services are located in the Baker hospital.

At present, NCH’s cardiac center averages 470 open heart procedures a year and 4,200 patients a year are sent annually to the cardiac catheterization lab for diagnostic tests or procedures.

The new heart center would allow for three more cardiovascular operating rooms and one hybrid operating room with pre-op and post-op capabilities, according to the plan. In addition, the center would have four to five more cardiac catheterization rooms, and a new CT scanner.

The building also would have four to five classrooms that would replace classroom space that would be lost when the Telford building gets torn down.

Because of some space reconfiguration that would be done in the main hospital, 54 patient rooms that are semi-private now would be converted to all private rooms, Jonathan Kling, chief operating officer of NCH, said Friday.

“The current patient traffic will not change,” he said.