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Health, Social Services Departments prepare for move to new building

By Michaela Sumner

[michaelasumner_now](#)

As spring approaches, new life will breathe into the county's consolidated human services building.

The project, which has been ongoing since September 2015, will relocate the county's health department, along with its Department of Social Services in an effort to provide more efficient services. The move is expected in April.

According to Assistant County Manager Sheri Slater, the health department will move in first and then DSS will move in stages, as the current parking lot isn't large enough for the departments' more than 300 employees. The current health department will be demolished in order to accommodate the additional parking.

Moving to the new building is something department heads say they're looking forward to.

"DSS has not been in the same building for about 20 years," Heidi Baur, director of social services, said, adding that having all services in the same building will be a benefit. "A lot of WIC clients are the same as DSS clients. It will be a one-stop shop and they won't have to drive all over Jacksonville trying to get the services they need."

Pam Brown, county health department public information officer, said investment into the building really boils down to an investment in building the community.

“Public health or the health department was originally established in the county in the early 1940s,” she said. “We have never had, in all that time, a building specifically designed for what public health provides to the community, so this is a brand new experience in that 40-year history.”

In years past, Slater said some county departments have been housed in repurposed buildings: the Health Department in an old hospital and DSS in an old shopping center and a bank. The buildings, she said, have served their purpose; but the departments always had to adjust the type of service or the way it was provided based on the location. The consolidated services building, in contrast, was designed according to program needs.

Recently, social services counted more than 260 children in foster care. As a part of that program, Slater said DSS schedules regular visits with the children’s families in an effort to reunite them.

“In our current building, we have one visitation room and so between school schedules, social worker schedules, family schedules, we have to make all of that happen; and it’s very difficult and it’s not a room that was designed for visits, so it’s not a warm and fuzzy kind of feeling,” Slater said.

The new building will have four visitation rooms, each designed for different kinds of visits, as well as an outside, yet private visitation area. The rooms will be designated and decorated based on age group, Baur said.

Slater described the rooms similar to a traditional living room; however, one will be designed for families with small children and contain things like a rocking chair. Another, she said, will be designed for older children and include things like a hockey table, because older children are more likely to talk while doing an activity.

Moving to the new building will provide the health department with office space and clinic rooms.

“Here in the (current) health department, we currently have some nurses who have their office space in their exam room,” Slater said. Efficiency, she said, diminishes when nurses can prep patients between appointments because the room is also being used as an office space. While the new office space won’t offer individual offices, it will be private from the public, avoiding any HIPAA violations.

In addition to office spaces, there will be clinic space and large training areas in the new building.

“There are so many programmatic problems that are improved because the building was designed for this purpose in mind,” Slater said. Having a building designed around programs will help the health department serve the public faster and more efficiently, Slater said, so their wait time for appointments will be less.

Angela Lee, county health department director, said the building will provide more and better opportunities for the department to serve the community, so each person has an equal chance of a lifetime of a good health.

“Public health touches each person each day, and we invite members of the public to not only visit the new building, but to take part in the educational programs and opportunities the health department offers,” she said.

In the midst of demolition, one endearing staple of the health department will be lost. Staff members have said they’ll miss the three-story deciduous tree growing just feet away from the building’s entrance, Slater said.

“This tree couldn’t be saved because it’s part of the foundation of the building now,” Slater said. “We will compromise it greatly with the demolition of the building.”

However, just as life will breathe into the new human services building in the coming months, new life in the form of trees and shrubs will be planted across the parking lot. As a part of Jacksonville’s downtown plan, the city has established requirements for the number of islands per space and the landscaping per island, Slater said.

Although she hasn’t heard complaints from any health department staff, Brown said the county is hoping to put in more trees and shrubs than are impacted in the demolition. “For any trees or shrubs that existed on campus previous to construction starting, we are planning to put even more trees and shrubs into landscape near and around areas than what existed previously,” she said.

For more information about the consolidated human services building, visit OnslowCountyNC.gov.

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