

Future of Highland Ave. hospital still unknown

Committee working to sell buildings, find alternative use

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Middle Tennessee Medical Center completed its move Saturday, but the future of the older hospital on Highland Avenue remains a mystery.

"We want to do something that's compatible with the neighborhood," said Matt Murfree, the chairman of the hospital board. "One thing that is problematic is that our campus is so big."



MURFREE

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Hospital officials would like to sell multiple buildings as one property if possible rather than to break it up, said Murfree, who is a Murfreesboro attorney.

"You'd have to be pretty darn big to buy the whole thing," he said, noting that a government or corporation could be possible buyers. "If you have the chance to sell the whole building, you don't want to sell it off piece by piece."

Any portion of the non-profit hospital that will no longer be in service to MTMC will return to the tax rolls in 2011 after a measurement of the property, Rutherford County Property Assessor Bill Boner said.

The Murfreesboro City Council has also rezoned much of the Highland area surrounding the old hospital to allow for more commercial land uses.

City and hospital officials had hoped earlier this year the old hospital could have been used as a personnel office for MTMC's nonprofit parent company, Ascension Health, but another location was chosen.

"We were in the final three for a back office personnel operation," Murfree said. "It was going to be white-collar jobs. It was a large number. It would have been a real boon for our community."

Another issue is whether the original 1927 hospital building that faces University Avenue behind the newer Highland Avenue MTMC buildings can be preserved. It's possible the next owner would decide the 1927 building needs to be torn down for parking, Murfree added.



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A sign outside the Highland Avenue campus of Middle Tennessee Medical Center alerts people that the location, in operation for 83 years, has closed and the hospital has reopened at 1700 Medical Center Parkway.



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Danny Jackson, the last Emergency Department patient, receives a ceremonial send-off as he leaves MTMC's Highland Avenue location on his way to be cared for at the new MTMC on Medical Center Parkway on Saturday morning.

The oldest building remains in decent shape, but it would not be worth saving if MTMC had an opportunity to sell it to a developer that needed the space for other purposes, said Bill Huddleston, an MTMC board member who's chairman of the old hospital disposal committee.

"Now that we have a new hospital we no longer have a need for it to serve as a hospital," said Huddleston, whose firm Huddleston-Steele Engineers is based in Murfreesboro. "It might not be worth preserving. We want something there that can sustain itself."

Huddleston understands that many longtime residents have strong memories of the 1927 building.

"A lot of us were born there," said Huddleston, who's also on the hospital board. "I was born there (May 30, 1963), back when there was no air conditioning is what my mother told me. We would like to see it saved, but then again if it means that some project comes down the road I don't know that it would have to be saved. I don't know that the



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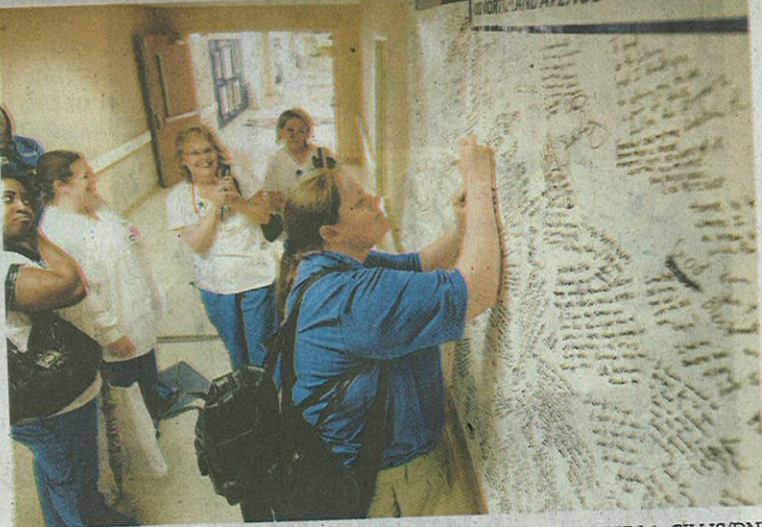
Mike Lee of Apex Moving prepares equipment to be taken to the Middle Tennessee Medical Center while walking a floor that has been 'decommissioned' at the Highland Avenue campus on Saturday.

historical or architectural (value) makes it worth saving."

The hospital disposal committee has been working with Nashville consultants Southeast Venture to figure out how to attract a buyer or group of buyers that will bring in industry that keeps jobs on Highland Avenue.

"We have a good committee, and we're going to work hard to do that," Huddleston said.

He's confident that the nearby downtown area around the Public Square and Murfreesboro City Hall will continue to thrive despite the hospital relocating its operation to Medical Cen-



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Secretary Kelly Lane writes a farewell message on the board on the final day of business at the Highland Avenue campus of Middle Tennessee Medical Center on Saturday. There is no word yet on how the campus will be utilized or who may purchase it in the future.

ter Parkway.

"Murfreesboro has great character, and whatever we do with the old hospital will supplement that," Huddleston said. "I think the higher priority is to make sure the overall property is improved to enhance the entire downtown area."

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