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Our View: SwedishAmerican steps up again to meet health care needs of the community

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HEALTH FACILITIES & SERVICES REVIEW BOARD

By The Editorial Board / Rockford Register Star

SwedishAmerican, a division of UW Health, keeps one-upping itself.

In February, SwedishAmerican announced a partnership with Aunt Martha's Health & Wellness that will [illegible] access to poor people who often do not have insurance.

In March, SwedishAmerican announced plans for a $4.1 million clinic on Rockford's west side, a historically underserved area.

Now we're into April, and SwedishAmerican on Tuesday announced the biggest of big deals in its quest to increase access to high-quality health care throughout the region.

SwedishAmerican officials unveiled plans for a $130 million expansion of its medical campus, which will include a four-story structure to serve women and children and will include an intensive care unit upgraded to the highest-rated level of care for newborns.

That's a $130 million investment on top of the $77 million hotel and convention center approved by the Rockford City Council on Monday night, continuing Rockford's recent winning streak.

The size of SwedishAmerican's investment is impressive, but not as impressive as the community needs that will be met once the facility is complete.

The Winnebago County Mental Health Advisory Committee last year issued a report that showed gaps in services so vast that the county was facing a mental health "emergency."

SwedishAmerican responded by adding 10 beds for behavioral health care in its latest plan. Better yet, officials are "seriously exploring" the possibility that some of the beds could be for children younger than 12 years old. There are no psychiatric beds available for children that young in Rockford, a sad fact highlighted in the advisory committee's report.

The emergency room at Swedes was built to handle 45,000 patients a year. Now it's serving 75,000 and probably will accept even more patients in the future. The need to update and expand the facility is obvious.

Those are a couple of highlights of the project for what is the busiest hospital in the region. SwedishAmerican has more than 15,000 admissions, delivers more than 2,500 babies and has more than 750,000 outpatient visits in a year

The SwedishAmerican expansion, which is expected to open in 2020, will create about 600 construction jobs and nearly 100 permanent health care jobs, which makes SwedishAmerican a driver of economic development as well.

There's more. SwedishAmerican not only improves the health of its patients; it improves the health of the neighborhood it occupies.

SwedishAmerican Foundation has renovated more than 200 properties and partnered with the Rockford Police Department to bring a Strong Neighborhood House to the Jackson Oaks neighborhood. Strong Neighborhood Houses are places where community police officers will have regular office hours as a way to build trust with residents. It's one way to improve public safety and SwedishAmerican's efforts to aid that challenge are appreciated.

Since 2001, SwedishAmerican will have invested more than $630 million in its campus. And then there's the Regional Cancer Center that opened in 2013 and the acquisition and renovation of a community hospital medical center in Belvidere.

SwedishAmerican not only invests in doctors, nurses and medicine, but in the communities it serves.

Those investments, along with projects such as OSF Saint Anthony Medical Center' $85 million expansion and the $505 million. Mercyhealth hospital and medical center campus on Interstate 90 and Riverside Boulevard make Rockford a regional destination for health care. State-of-the-art-facilities in areas where residents and visitors can access them drives quality health care.

Much of the credit for SwedishAmerican's transformation goes to Dr. Bill Gorski, who has led the health system as president and CEO since 2001. We joked with Gorski that he was cramming a lot of good things into his final days on the job. He hinted that he might not be done with big announcements.

May and June lie ahead, so don't be surprised if Gorski delivers more good news.