

Election 2009

# A New Wishard is on the way

On Tuesday night, balloons and confetti fell in celebration of a landslide election victory that clears the way for a new \$754 million Wishard Memorial Hospital complex.

Soon – according to Marion County Health and Hospital Corp. – the wrecking ball will begin to tear down the vacant hospital and health buildings, between West Michigan and West 10th streets Downtown, to be replaced with an ultra-modern 1.2 million-square-foot hospital complex with roughly 300 inpatient beds.

Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard called the election about 8:30 p.m. Just minutes later, Health and Hospital Corp. Chief Executive Matt Gutwein said the victory revealed much about the city's character: "What it tells us is we have a city that cares, a city of compassion, of decency, a city that looks at every one of our neighbors and cares about those people."

The new Wishard Memorial Hospital will be built with the help of taxpayer-backed bonds.

With 318 of 590 precincts reporting late Tuesday, Wishard supporters easily won in all of them – 32,389 to 6,676, or almost 83 percent approval.

The voter approval – required by state law – means plans will quickly move forward on

the facility, to be built on the west side of the campus of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis on the sites of the old Larue D. Carter Memorial Hospital and the Board of Health building.

Demolition of those buildings is expected to begin in the coming weeks, with construction work starting in the spring. Health and Hospital Corp. officials have said the new complex could be completed by late 2013.

Voters across the county voiced their support for the project.

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**“What it [the election] tells us is we have a city that cares, a city of compassion,**

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Beech Grove resident Brenda Gallagher, who supported the Wishard referendum, said she was injured on the job and is treated at the hospital through Wishard Health Advantage.

“It’s aggravating having to go there because they’re so overburdened, but it’s a godsend that they’re there,” she said. “It’s old. They need a new facility for sure.”



Health and Hospital Corp. had said Wishard's 17-building campus is too old to be updated and outfitted with modern electrical and mechanical equipment now common in hospitals. Some of the buildings on the campus date back 95 years.

Indianapolis' business, political and civic elite lined up behind the project, and Ballard was one of the first public officials to speak out in favor of it.

Citizens for Wishard, a political action committee, has contributed mass voter mailings and other get-out-the-vote efforts. The group has received more than \$1 million in donations from physician groups IU Health and the IU Medical Group Foundation.

Susan Decker, spokeswoman for Citizens for Wishard, said Tuesday that group had 75 people going door to door and 175 people who worked phone banks to reach voters. The group also distributed 300 "Wishard Yes" yard signs.

Some voiced opposition to the Wishard project. Much of that criticism centered on doubts that Health and Hospital Corp. would be able to pay the estimated \$604 million to \$703 million debt over the 30 years of the project without additional county property tax revenue.

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## **"Many voters on Tuesday said their main concern was helping to ensure that Wishard remains a fixture in Marion County."**

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"My only concern was and still is that (Health and Hospital Corp.) is not being forthright with everyone," said state Rep. Phil Hinkle, R-Indianapolis.

Last week, Hinkle and state Sen. Scott Schneider, R-Indianapolis, spoke out against the project.

Although the potential for higher taxes was the most prominent reason people voted no, it wasn't the only one.

"There are too many hospitals already in that area (Downtown)," said Richard Doran, 56, Beech Grove, who said he thinks there is greater need in other parts of the county.



ROBERT SCHEER / The Star

Gutwein has steadfastly maintained that Health and Hospital Corp. will be able to make payments without having to use additional revenue from property taxes. He has said the corporation runs annual surpluses and has set aside \$150 million in cash for the project.

Many voters on Tuesday said their main concern was helping to ensure that Wishard remains a fixture in Marion County.

"Wishard is a valuable asset to the community and needs to be maintained," said Rich Gutierrez, Indianapolis, taking a break from work to vote at a polling place at The Children's Museum.

Wishard serves roughly two-thirds of Marion County's uninsured patients. It also is a major teaching hospital for the Indiana University School of Medicine and offers specialized care, such as a Level 1 trauma center and the state's largest burn unit.

Greg Foote, 85, said he lives on Social Security and is struggling with health-care-related payments as a result of the "doughnut hole" in his Medicare prescription drug benefit. But he said he wanted

to help those less fortunate by supporting Wishard.

"Society and the culture readily leave behind the underdogs," said Foote, just after he voted at Sidener Academy in the Glendale neighborhood.

Still others voted in favor of the Wishard project for more personal reasons.

Tim Luttrell, Beech Grove, works in the construction industry. "It will create a lot of work," he said just after casting his vote at Central Elementary.

Peggy Fitzgerald said her husband is a retired firefighter and knows of the high-quality burn care provided at Wishard. Fitzgerald said the importance of a new Wishard overrode any concern she had about the potential for higher taxes.

She said, "I decided personally, even if it does cost me in property taxes, I'm willing to pay it."