

Waco VA hospital campus showing signs of renovation

By Regina Dennis Waco Tribune-Herald staff writer

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Fences, heavy machinery and green garbage bins are stationed on nearly every corner of the Waco Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

Workers in hard hats toil steadfastly on a variety of projects — pouring concrete, stripping whole buildings to their bare walls, discarding construction debris.

The work has meant shuffling staff and programs around and redirecting visitors.

Work being done inside Building One at the VA Hospital complex is one of several renovation projects at the facility. Duane A. Laverty/Waco Tribune-Herald

“What I hear from the visitors and the employees is just how beautiful it’s going to be and how excited they are about it,” said Robin Keene, interim hospital administrator. “Yes, it’s the growing pains (of dealing with construction), but they all understand what the goal is and what a beautiful campus we’re going to have.”

Much of the work centers on renovating buildings on the campus for new uses.

Building 1, the iconic main building on the campus facing the Avenue of Flags, will be converted to a medical tower with various clinics.

The project is funded through \$7.9 million in federal stimulus funds the hospital received last year.

The building has already received new energy-efficient windows, electrical system upgrades and a new heating, ventilation and air conditioning system.

Construction workers have completely gutted the building’s basement and moved on to stripping the upper floors.

“If you do a face-lift to a building without doing a demolition of the inside, you’ll just be spinning your wheels,” said David Lindeman, staff architect for the Waco campus. “It’s much better to do a full demolition, take care of all of your building infrastructure, and you can walk away and say that this building will last for another 20 years.”

The construction work has moved forward slowly at the hospital, which employs about 800 people. Stimulus-funded road improvements have begun in phases, the smooth concrete-paved west entrance on Beverly Drive contrasting with the bumpy main campus loop.

The Waco VA was awarded \$49 million by Congress in 2007 for five minor construction projects, which include creating a Center for Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans in Building 93; renovating Building 8 to house the acute psychiatry program; reconfiguring Building 9 to house the blind rehabilitation center and community living center; and constructing a new laundry facility that will serve VA facilities in Waco, Temple, Dallas, Bonham and Darnall Army Medical Center.



*Deputy Associate Chief Robin Keene looks over a VA greenhouse, which recently was restored.
Duane A. Laverty/Waco Tribune-Herald*

Visible progress slow

However, the first measurable progress has only begun this year on those projects.

A full interior demolition of Building 93 has been completed, but the construction contract for the interior renovations is tentatively set to be awarded in January.

The staff and programs of Buildings 8 and 9 have been moved to other parts of the campus, but each of the buildings must still be stripped inside.

Charles Yale, chief of planning, design and construction for the Central Texas Veterans Healthcare System, said the seemingly slow process of moving the projects forward is largely because of procedural and administrative guidelines.

“I think people get frustrated because as soon as it hits the street that we’re doing something, they expect the project to be done immediately,” Yale said. “But the government is a bureaucracy, so there’s several steps we have to take that people on the outside don’t see.”

First, there was a lengthy bid process to select an architectural firm to design the renovation plans.

Wiginton Hooker Jeffry Architects produced the building designs for all five projects, an undertaking that took about a year to complete.

The hospital also has to go up through the chain of command to obtain funds during each phase of construction.

In addition, Lindeman said, the VA project requires time to preserve the historical look of the buildings. Buildings 8 and 9 will get exterior face-lifts, but will retain much of the original red brick facade.



Architect David Lindeman looks up at decorative columns uncovered during demolition of Building 1 at the Waco VA Hospital. Many buildings on the campus are being totally renovated.

Duane A. Laverty/Waco Tribune-Herald

While gutting Building 1, workers discovered intricate, Greek-style designs at the top of columns throughout the first-floor foyer. The designs had been covered up when the ceilings were lowered to hide HVAC upgrades installed in the 1960s, Lindeman said.

“It’s really beautiful, and almost unbelievable that they were covered up,” Lindeman said while standing in the middle of the ongoing demolition of the foyer. “We definitely want to be sensitive to the historical nature of the buildings and really highlight these designs.”

The hospital does have some completed projects under its belt. Last year, the campus opened a new Women’s Health Center on the first floor of building 91.

Volunteers have helped reopen a greenhouse on campus that was once used as therapy for veterans in the community living centers and acute psychiatry program.

Walmart has donated chrysanthemums to start the greenhouse, and raised beds for herbs will be installed in the future, Keene said.

The basement floor of Building 90 was reconstructed to create offices for a new national Pharmacy Call Center that handles all prescription-related inquiries for veterans across the country. The floor currently houses about 80 call center employees.

In the future, the top two levels of the building will be renovated, bringing the call center’s potential capacity to 400 employees, Lindeman said.

