

Abortion clinic built under radar

Planned Parenthood to open Aurora site

By Bonnie Miller Rubin and James Kimberly | Tribune staff reporters

July 27, 2007

Neighbors who drive by the bustling construction site in Aurora think they are seeing the completion of the "Gemini Health Center," just as the sign says. So do the painters, carpenters, electricians and other tradesmen who have been working on the project for the last eight months.

But in a few weeks the sign will be changed to reflect the true owners of the building: Planned Parenthood. At 22,000 square feet, this is among its larger facilities in the nation, providing a wide range of women's health services -- including abortions.

Growth in the counties Aurora straddles -- DuPage, Will, Kendall and Kane -- has created an intense need for more comprehensive and affordable women's health care. And while the majority of patients come to Planned Parenthood for birth control, testing for gynecological cancers or screening for sexually transmitted diseases, it is the abortions that have made this a stealth venture almost 35 years after Roe vs. Wade, which legalized abortion nationwide.

"Frankly, I'm surprised we were able to keep it a secret for so long," said Steve Trombley, president and chief executive officer of Planned Parenthood/Chicago Area, carefully avoiding a freshly painted wall as he offered a tour of the facility. "We didn't want anything to interfere with the opening ... and, at this point, I don't anticipate anything will stop that from happening."

The \$7.5 million facility at 240 N. Oakhurst Drive, in DuPage County, adjacent to a Dominick's, is scheduled to open Sept. 18. In the planning stages since 2002, it is Planned Parenthood's first full-service site in the Chicago area in 20 years and the only one to perform abortions outside of a Near North Side Chicago location. Private donors contributed \$5 million toward its construction. It would be the only clinic performing abortions in Aurora; another clinic closed last year after its doctor retired.

As of Thursday, not a single protester had appeared on the scene. But even at this late date, anti-abortion activists vow to create some hurdles to abortion in Aurora.

"It is not going to be possible to stop construction," conceded Ann Scheidler, executive director of the Pro-Life Action League. "It's probably more a matter of damage control at this point." Scheidler said the league is bringing to town the executive director of the anti-abortion

group STOPP, which seeks to shutter Planned Parenthood, to a strategy meeting scheduled for Aug. 16.

Avoiding builder boycotts

That the clinic was kept hush-hush for so long was no accident. Planned Parenthood adopted the strategy after a 2004 boycott by contractors stalled work for two months on a clinic in Austin, Texas. The boycott, organized by a concrete contractor, pressured subcontractors with being blacklisted from future employment. The contractor ended up quitting the job, and Planned Parenthood acted as its own general contractor to finish the facility. Still, the tactic was heralded as a new economic tool in the arsenal of abortion foes. As in Austin, word of the Aurora clinic was leaked to anti-abortion forces by a contractor, Scheidler said. "He knew there was a recovery room. It was obviously a surgery center of some sort. I guess the bullet-proof glass and all the security, the security cameras, made him concerned," she said.

Aurora Councilman Chris Beykirch, who represents that part of the city, said he learned

that Planned Parenthood was building the clinic only last week. The property was zoned for a medical/office building, however, so the city could not have blocked construction -- not that it should have tried, he said. He said he was disappointed that the agency felt it was necessary to be secretive.

The project appears to be full-steam ahead. A staff of 24 -- answering "help wanted" ads for an unnamed clinic -- is being hired. The sleek cabinetry and faux wood floors are in place. The airy examining and recovery rooms are almost complete. It has a large conference room where the employees can meet with civic groups.

"We want to introduce ourselves to the community ... rather than be defined by our adversaries," Trombley said.

Kendall County is the nation's second-fastest-growing county, increasing by 62 percent from April 2000 to July 2006, according to U.S. Census Bureau data released last month. "This is a medically underserved area," Trombley said. The full-service Chicago clinic is 35 miles away, a significant hurdle for Aurora's low income and uninsured population.

"This is a conservative community -- but teens are very sexually active," said Wendy Fegenhols, who recently retired from the DuPage County Health Department and serves on the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health. "Anyone who is in contact with the school population recognizes the need." While teen pregnancy rates have declined during the last decade, sexually transmitted infections -- specifically, chlamydia and HIV -- have steadily increased in DuPage, Kane, Will and Kendall Counties, according to state health officials. Indeed, Planned Parenthood has opened three suburban "express" sites -- in Naperville, Schaumburg and Orland Park -- which mostly offer birth control and testing for sexually transmitted infections. The closest site to the new facility, in Naperville, logged more than 13,700 visits last year.

Foes plan protests

Planned Parenthood may have won the battle by building the Aurora clinic in secrecy, but the war is far from over, anti-abortion forces vowed. The Pro-Life Action League held a strategy session on the clinic Thursday and decided to begin picketing the site Aug. 22. The group intends to target not only the clinic, said Scheidler, but customers of nearby businesses as well.

"We will be out protesting with our ugly graphic pictures that everyone hates. People don't want to go shopping or go to the dentist with those pictures out there," Scheidler said.

Such tactics are precisely what have residents of the nearby Oakhurst subdivision concerned, said Homeowners Association President Jonathan Lack. The community of 2,200 homes -- more than half are single-family residences -- could best be described as "conservative and Republican." He predicted that among residents, "very few people are going to be in the 'I don't care' camp. ...