

NIU to build cancer treatment center

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A white tent sat tucked away Thursday amid rolling farm fields near the DuPage County Airport.

Inside, dozens of state and local officials, as well as several members of Northern Illinois University, met to celebrate a milestone of sorts.

In less than two years, university officials said they hope to open the doors to a new \$159 million proton cancer therapy center on the grounds.

"This is a glorious day," NIU board Chairman Cherilyn Murer said. "Let us take the moment and take in the sunshine."

Within days, construction is expected to begin on the facility, the anchor tenant for the DuPage National Technology Park in West Chicago.

State health regulators gave NIU the go-ahead in February to pursue construction of the treatment center. Only five such facilities, which use proton beams rather than standard radiation to treat a variety of cancers, exist in the country.

NIU officials invited 17 people to speak about the project during a two-hour-long ceremony.

Among the politicians in attendance were DuPage County board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom, West Chicago Mayor Michael Kwasman and former U.S. Rep. Dennis Hastert.

"It's just natural that this place become a high-tech park," Hastert said. "It's people coming together to do great things ... but when they put on those hard hats and take those shovels, the work won't be done."

While NIU doesn't have its own medical school, the school will have an agreement with the physician's group representing Northwestern University's medical school to provide clinical staffing on site.

The school's physics department also has begun research trials at two other proton treatment centers in California and Florida, which then will be moved to the Illinois center once it opens in February 2010.

"It's so satisfying to be a part of this team," said John Lewis, the university's project manager for the proton center. At the time "I had no idea of the magnitude of the assignment."

Both NIU and Central DuPage Hospital had been rushing to be the first to get state approval to construct similar treatment centers in the West suburbs.

The Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board has rejected the proposal by Central DuPage because of its proximity to the NIU site.

The Winfield hospital has since filed an appeal to the state's decision. NIU remains opposed to that project.

Several hospital officials from CDH attended Thursday's groundbreaking, including Jim Spear, the hospital's executive vice president.

Spear at first declined to comment on his reasons for attending. He then said, "It's a great day for cancer patients in Illinois."