

First Coast Oncology to add \$30M proton therapy center

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STAFF WRITER

JACKSONVILLE — First Coast Oncology PA is moving forward with its plans to add a \$30 million proton therapy center to its practice.

The practice has awarded a \$5 million contract to Sauer Inc. of Jacksonville for the construction of an 8,500-square-foot concrete structure that contains the proton accelerator. The unit, which First Coast Oncology will buy from Littleton, Mass.-based Mevion Medical Systems, is much smaller than the \$125 million unit at the University of Florida Proton Therapy Institute at Shands Jacksonville.

First Coast Oncology Medical Director Dr. Scot Ackerman said there's a demand for more proton therapy in Northeast Florida, with his practice routinely refers patients to the UF facility or MD Anderson Cancer Center in Orlando. Construction is slated to begin in June, with the unit scheduled to arrive in January. Ackerman said he hopes to start treating patients in the first half of 2013.

Proton therapy on the rise

Proton therapy is an alternative to standard linear radiation therapy as a cancer treatment. Protons are able to zero in on a tumor and do less damage to surrounding tissue than the photons used in linear radiation.

"It's not the end-all for everybody, but for certain tumors deep in the body, close to critical structures, protons are superior to photons," Ackerman said.

First Coast Oncology announced its intentions to add a proton therapy cen-



The first Mevion S250 Proton Therapy System has been installed at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, which is affiliated with the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis.

ter in 2008, with delivery slated for early 2011 because the unit was still in development. At that time, the oncology practice was under contract to buy the unit from Still River Systems, which was acquired by Mevion.

Ackerman said First Coast Oncology, which has four physicians, will buy the Mevion S250 Proton Therapy System with a combination of cash and debt financing.

"We're not looking to increase our patient volume," Ackerman said. "We're looking to take care of existing patients."

Mevion's first active proton accelerator has been installed at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, which is affiliated with Wash-

ington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. That device is now producing protons and has received certification for being in compliance with the European Union's Medical Device Directive. It can't yet treat patients in St. Louis because it hasn't received U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval. Ackerman said Mevion has submitted its formal application for FDA approval.

Mevion said in a March 14 news release that in addition to St. Louis, it's installing other devices at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Brunswick, N.J., and at the University of Oklahoma in Oklahoma City.

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In early February, a Palm Beach county oncology practice said it had entered an agreement to buy the Mevion machine, planning to start construction in 2013 and be operational by early 2014.

"[The units] are slow to construct," Ackerman said. "I'm glad to not be farther back in the queue."

Specialty construction

Brian Franco, vice president of marketing for Sauer Inc., said the project will be the first of its kind for Sauer.

"We've done various radiation vaults, with similar features in terms of thickened concrete walls. It's basically a vault, a radiation vault," Franco said. "We've built them before, but not for this type of an accelerator."

The vault will be added on to First Coast Oncology's Mandarin site. The concrete walls, Franco said, are 5 to 8 feet thick, and the building is three stories, including a basement.

A temporary roof is put on the building, then lifted to put the unit in place, Franco said. The permanent roof — "a concrete lid" — will be built once the unit is in place.

"The way we presented this project, when we competed for it, was like building a watch out of concrete, and not just any watch, but a Rolex," Franco said. "The concrete, you wouldn't think to be a very precise part of our trade, but in this case, you have to be very precise."

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