UPMC Braddock closing shocks everyone

Story and photos by Jack Ruskin

"Devastated," commented Braddock Carnegie Library executive director Vicki Vargo upon hearing that UPMC Braddock Hospital would be closed early next year.

On the surface, all appeared to be going in a positive direction at UPMC Braddock Hospital, until management shocked the community with the announcement last Friday that the facility would be closed on January 30, 2010.

Most people got the news when they heard an announcement on the radio or television.

This past June, a new $6 million Braddock Avenue entrance was officially opened, and new windows are currently being installed at both the hospital and professional building annex.

Hospital management, however, reported operating losses of $9.5 million for the previous fiscal year that ended in June.

The 103-year-old hospital was purchased by UPMC in 1996 and has grown over the years and currently has 123 beds, encompasses 277,000 square feet, and employees more than 650 people.

Joe Enos, a resident of Forest Hills was waiting in the hospital lobby Monday morning for a relative who is a patient.

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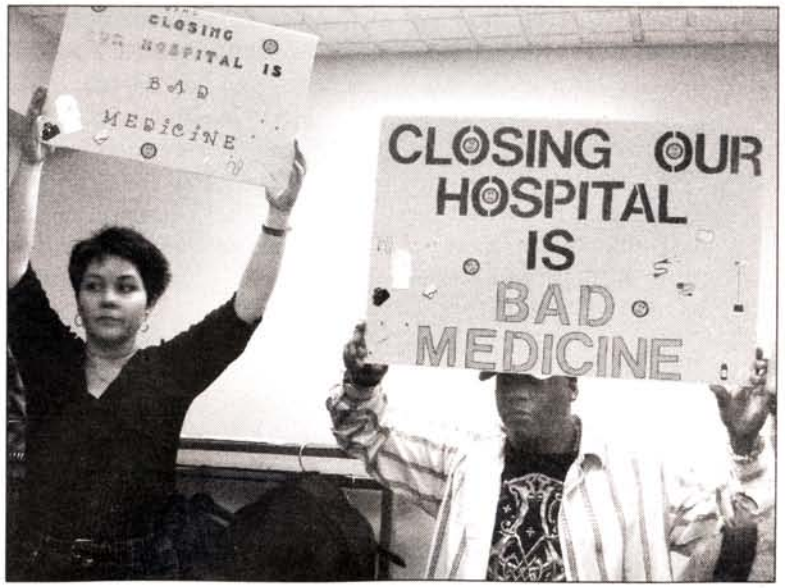

Residents express concern over hospital closing.

UPMC

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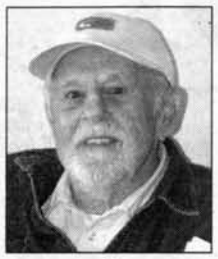

Joe Enos

"I don't know where we would have to go when this hospital closes, probably to Forbes," he said.

The hospital's coffee and gift shop, operated by an organization of volunteers called the Cot Club, serves as a meeting place for many retirees who congregate there daily, to socialize and purchase sandwiches.

I've worked here in the café for 12 years, five as a volunteer, and it is sad to see Braddock going down hill, commented Rose Melocchi. Rose added that she received a letter over the weekend informing her that her job was being eliminated.

"I hate to see this happening," she added.

A UPMC spokesperson said employees would be offered positions at other regional UPMC hospitals, but several of the outreach programs such as the Steps to a Health Community and the Dental Center would continue to operate, although a location was not yet determined.

Gina Mariani explained that she started working at UPMC Braddock when she was 19-years-of-age.

"This is real sad. They have told us to go on-line to seek employment, but there aren't that many jobs available. Everyone on our floor has been here for at least 10 years. We are like a family. I think they could have presented it to us better and not do it so quickly," Gina commented.

UPMC also reports that operating losses have amounted to $27 million over the past six years and said that only one in five Braddock residents used the hospital.

Repairs to the Rankin Bridge and the Tri-Boro expressway apparently have affected the number of people using the hospital during the previous several months, but there are no statistics to confirm that assumption.

When word reached Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato, he called the decision disappointing and unacceptable. He added, "That because the hospital receives significant amounts of tax dollars, more thought should be given to closing an institution that could affect the entire Mon Valley."

Onorato even commented about being at the hospital when some of the renovations were announced.

UPMC said it would talk with as many as 60 local physicians and ask them to provide primary care for local residents.

"I live in West Mifflin and bring my father over here. I prefer this hospital," commented Nancy Watson.

Nancy Watson

"We are going to go where my father's doctor recommends, and that will probably be Shadyside," Nancy explained.

Lori Harris Wilson echoed similar comments.

"I live in Rankin and bring my mother here every month for her blood work. I'm not sure where we would have to go, but I think Oakland is the closest," Lori said.

Lori Harris Wilson

Braddock Mayor John Fetterman, Vicki Vargo, U.S. Representative Mike Doyle, and state Senator Sean Logan all voiced disbelief and expressed the need to meet with UPMC officials, as soon as possible, to ask that the closing be reconsidered.

Mayor Fetterman said he understands that the people are upset and angry, however he is trying to see a positive side to the situation and acknowledges that UPMC Braddock Hospital has been an active partner with the community and has lived with economic losses for quite a few years.

At a public hearing in the Professional Building Tuesday evening, extra chairs were brought in to handle a crowd of 115 residents and local officials, while 30 more people listened from another room.

"It has been 100-hours since the official announcement of the hospital's closing, and in 100 days this facility will be closed," UPMC Braddock President Cynthia Dorundo remarked as the first official speaker at the gathering.

Using a presentation of statistics to explain economic losses and reduced public usage during the previous ten-plus years, Dorundo tried to explain the reasoning behind the decision and emphasized the many services that would still be available to the public.

Representative Paul Costa told the gathering that UPMC CEO/President Jeffrey Romoff told him, Mike Doyle, Dan Onorato and other government representatives during a special meeting Monday: "The community hospital model is no longer viable."

Braddock residents were told they should use other UPMC hospitals within five-miles of Braddock, and many expressed their upset when told UPMC intends to build a large hospital in Monroeville.

Braddock Borough Manager Ella Jones questioned whether UPMC gave any consideration to senior citizens and other officials wondered if the hospital was truly doing enough for the community.

Local filmmaker Tony Buba asked why the hospital couldn't be kept open for another few years and gradually shut down. He also asked if CEO Jeffrey Romoff would take a $2 million pay cut.

New Braddock Avenue entrance

At the meetings conclusion, Braddock Mayor Fetterman and council President Jesse Brown urged the public to be calm and consider possible uses for the building and have creative solutions to the problem of a community without a hospital.