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MISSOULA

## Groundbreaking, design set for new \$31M VA clinic in Missoula

David Erickson

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An architectural rendering of the new VA clinic in Missoula.

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**D**etails are emerging on plans for a new \$31 million Veterans Affairs clinic to be located in Missoula, which will break ground in the spring of 2020 and is estimated to be open in mid-2022.

The Montana Veterans Health Administration announced this fall that the new clinic will be located near the intersection of West Broadway and Flynn Lane, west of Reserve Street.

The current **David J. Thatcher VA clinic in Missoula** is located on 2687 Palmer St., suite C. It's approximately 20,000 square feet, while the new clinic will be around 60,000 square feet, a 300% increase in size.

“The new location is within proximity to three major thoroughfares allowing the new VA clinic to be easily accessible by multiple highways,” wrote VA spokesperson Christina Lundstrom in a press release. “There will be increased parking space available, (it) is close to multiple restaurants, hotels, shopping centers and there are bus stops located within the immediate vicinity of the new site.”

The current VA clinic will continue to serve patients until the new clinic opens.

The Montana VA Health Care System serves over 47,000 enrolled Veterans across Montana, an area roughly 147,000 square miles in size, according to Lundstrom.

“Veterans are cared for by a staff of more than 1,300 (over a third are Veterans themselves) at 17 sites of care across the state,” she wrote.

Rodney Morrell, a 65-year-old U.S. Navy veteran who is partially disabled from injuries unrelated to his service, was visiting Missoula’s VA clinic on Tuesday from his home in Clinton.

“It’s pretty cramped,” he said of the existing space. “They definitely need more room.”

Morrell said he’s been happy with the VA services in Missoula, but complicated procedures currently require veterans to travel to Helena or Salt Lake City. Overall, he's happy with the level of care provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs despite some minor problems with keeping good doctors.

“It’s outstanding,” he said. “The VA’s getting a lot better. Their consults used to be a third-party intervention. And now the VA handles it. Albeit still a little slow, it’s much more efficient. Really, the VA’s been a God-send for me.”

The Department of Veterans Affairs awarded the contract to build the new facility to a team of real estate developers: Juliet Development, Madison Marquette and Hamstra Builders.

Chad Suitonu with Juliet Development said the state-of-the-art facility will offer military veterans of Missoula and the surrounding area a variety of medical services, including primary care, women’s health, lab work, a pharmacy, sleep therapy, prosthetic services, tele-health, physical therapy and a variety of other exams and treatments.

“This facility exemplifies the VA’s continued commitment to service the medical needs of our nation’s veterans,” he said.

The architect is Leo A. Daly and the civil engineer is Territorial Landworks. The construction will be jointly performed by Hamstra Builders and Quality Construction Company.

The clinic is being built on a lot where city and county planners want to extend Mary Jane Boulevard to connect with West Broadway. That hasn’t happened yet, but County Commissioners Josh Slotnick and Dave Strohmaier told the Missoulian last week that the clinic can be built without the connection. They also hope that a **\$23.2 million federal BUILD grant will help pay for the extension of Mary Jane and other infrastructure** in the rapidly-growing area west of Reserve Street and north of Mullan Road.

Slotnick said improved infrastructure such as a Mary Jane extension will happen eventually, but that the BUILD grant would make things go a lot faster.

U.S. Sen. Steve Daines met with U.S. Secretary of Transportation Elaine Chao last month and expressed the importance of the BUILD grant for Missoula and the state, according to Daines’ communications office. Daines, a Republican, also told Chao that

without the BUILD grant, the new VA clinic “won’t be possible.”

Chao is ultimately responsible for determining which communities get the BUILD grants.

U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, a Democrat, said in a statement that the project is long overdue.

“For too long, veterans in western Montana had to make do with an undersized clinic and overworked staff, but no more,” Tester said. “This facility will provide the high quality health care folks who served this country in uniform earned and deserve.”

Sen. Tester supported construction of the new VA clinic as the ranking member of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee and helped pass the 2017 VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017.

A spokesperson for Tester told the Missoulian that the lump sum payment for the buildout of the project will be \$8,924,859.

### Clarification

Due to incomplete information provided to the Missoulian, an earlier version of this article inaccurately described the total construction cost of this project. It is \$31 million total.

**David Erickson**

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