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CONSTITUTION PLAZA PROPOSAL

St. Francis Hospital Seeking Space In Downtown Hartford



The entrance to the tower planned for 3 Constitution Plaza in Hartford is seen in this artist's rendering. St. Francis Hospital is looking at leasing space in the new building on the former site of WFSB's "Broadcast House." (CBT Architects)

By KENNETH R. GOSSELIN
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St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center could open medical offices in a new office tower proposed for downtown Hartford — seeing an opportunity to become the first hospital to provide services in the city's central business district.

St. Francis, which also is building a 10-story addition to its hospital in Asylum Hill, has signed a letter of intent to lease space in the office tower proposed for the site of the old WFSB, Channel 3, studios on Constitution Plaza.

Lease negotiations are continuing, and it isn't clear what services would be provided by the hospital and during which hours. But during a press conference Thursday on plans for the 12-story tower, hospital officials were optimistic that a lease agreement would be reached.

"We fully expect our letter of intent will be realized," said Paul E. Pendergast, president of the hospital's foundation. "We're very, very excited about the project."

In an interview, Pendergast said St. Francis has established medical offices in the Hartford suburbs to bring medical services closer to residents there. But the thousands who live and work in downtown Hartford don't have that option, he said.

Pendergast said it is possible the medical offices could dispense immunizations and other services, such as X-rays, oncology support and gastrointestinal procedures. Having those and other services downtown would allow people to spend less time away from work, he said.

Health care is one of the few employment sectors in Connecticut that showed growth this year, though the sector has lost some momentum.

The state gained 1,000 health care and social assistance jobs between September 2008 and September 2009, an increase of 0.4 percent. That compares with an overall employment drop of 4.5 percent in the same period, or 76,300 jobs.

Donald L. Klepper-Smith, an economist at DataCore Partners Inc. in New Haven, said health care jobs have been recession resistant but aren't recession proof. He said it was too soon to predict whether there might be a surge of

growth in the sector in an economic recovery.

The hospital's interest in the \$45 million tower is the first from a potential outside tenant. The builder, Abul A. Islam, is leasing two floors for his company, AI Engineers Inc., now based in [Middletown](#). Islam said Wednesday that a tenant was interested in one floor — that tenant is St. Francis.

Signing up tenants is key to the project securing financing. Even counting St. Francis, a little under 30 percent of the 180,000 square feet of office space is spoken for. To obtain financing, at least 60 percent must be "pre-leased," Islam said.

The tower also has 16,000 square feet of retail space, some of it on street level and some that could be used for public meeting space.

If financing is secured, construction could begin in late spring or early summer of 2010, with space ready for tenants by late summer or early fall 2011.

Demolition of the old television news studios is expected to be completed in three weeks.

Islam has invested \$2 million of his own money in the project, buying and now knocking down the studio building, long known as Broadcast House.

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