

Livingston visit

# Tester tours 'tired' hospital

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"Unbelievable," Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., said shaking his head as he looked at a broom closet-turned-office at Livingston Memorial Hospital Saturday morning.

"But the staff keeps going," Livingston HealthCare CEO Sam Pleshar told the senator.

Tester was in Livingston for a Friday Democratic fundraiser. Saturday he toured LMH and talked with Pleshar about plans for a new hospital and also visited the site of the railroad underpass the City of Livingston plans to build near the intersection of Star Road and Front Street. Both organizations have been in touch with Tester's office about funding requests.

The city and LHC, the nonprofit organization that runs LMH, have requested federal aid for construction projects. The City of Livingston has already been allocated about \$917,000 in federal money toward the underpass.

Earlier this year, Tester and Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., announced Congress had set aside \$150,000 for LHC in a bill. The organization is waiting to see if its allocation makes it through the approval process.

LHC would put that money toward a new hospital and medical campus planned for land on the east side of the bridge that spans the Yellowstone River near the old KPRK radio station building. The current hospital is too small for the needs of LHC and its patients — hence tactics like the broom closet office for squeezing space out of the building, Pleshar told Tester.

Pleshar and LHC Community Development Director Sandi Marlowe told the senator that patients still receive quality care because LHC staff work hard to not let space constraints compromise service or medical treatment. Plus, LHC tries to shift burdens of space troubles to staff members rather than have them interfere with patients, they said.

"It's tired, it was built for health care then, not health care now," Pleshar said of the hospital that



Livingston HealthCare CEO Sam Pleshar gestures while talking to Montana State Rep. Bob Ebinger, D-Livingston, center, and U.S. Senator Jon Tester, D-Mont., right, during a tour of Livingston Memorial Hospital on Saturday morning.

Enterprise photo by Stephen Matlow

was built in the 1950s.

LHC now employs about 320 people who are spread among 18 buildings in Livingston, Pleshar said. The new campus, estimated to cost \$38 million, will likely consolidate staff members and service to one campus, he said.

Tester asked questions about the details of the project, like its location and timeline. He also talked with Pleshar about the value health care operations bring to a rural community.

"It's kind of like a school," Tester said. "You have a sub-par school and people don't move there."

LHC is in the process of applying for a loan through the United

States Department of Agriculture to fund the new facility. If all goes well with financing, LHC could break ground in 2011, Pleshar said.

LHC leaders have said they are still working on details of creating a formalized relationship with Billings Clinic and determining exactly what role that organization will play in the operation of the new LHC campus.

Tester also took a look at the city's site for the planned underpass and talked with City Manager Ed Meece about the current phase of the project that includes components such as design work and environmental studies.

"If things go well, we're in construction in 2012," Meece told Tester.

The senator and the staff members with him talked with Meece about being impressed that Livingston residents several years ago approved a mill levy to tax themselves in order to add local dollars to the other funding sources for the project.

The overall project costs will be about \$8.6 million, Meece said.

Tester complimented Meece and LHC leaders on the work they've done on their respective projects thus far and encouraged them to keep in touch with updates on their progress.