Gilbert eyes future as health care leader

Beth Lucas, Tribune

December 9, 2007

Gilbert officials are banking on the town becoming a major health care center in Arizona — one that could attract national acclaim for its innovative focus on research-based medicine, women’s health care and holistic alternatives.

Many town leaders stand by a vision to have the medicine and health care market lead Gilbert’s economy, saying it’s a common-sense plan that would be simply taking the reins of health care growth that has already begun in the town.

“There are certainly indications now that we’re moving toward a larger presence of health care in the Valley,” Town Councilwoman Joan Krueger said.

Since February 2006, three hospitals have opened in Gilbert, bringing 2,090 jobs and drawing dozens of doctors’ offices and related medical clinics and services.

On Wednesday, the town will receive results from a study by Arizona State University’s Morrison Institute for Public Policy on whether a major health care market could develop in Gilbert. The town has the option of having the institute expand its study.

Gilbert officials also will have to decide how to go about selling health care as the town’s niche market and working to attract more research and medical firms, health care centers and equipment manufacturers.

Opening of the town’s first hospitals have already begun to attract unique programs, such as the planned Celebration Centre for Integrated Healing, a holistic medical center that will complement traditional medicine with alternative therapies. The center is planned to be adjacent to Mercy Gilbert Medical Center at Loop 202 and Val Vista Drive.

“I think with the health care industry on the forefront of major changes, I believe in the next five years, we can really be a part of this new way of looking at health care and research,” said Kathy Langdon, president and CEO of the Gilbert Chamber of Commerce. “It’s really cutting edge.”

GIVE IT TIME

Gilbert shouldn’t expect success overnight and will have to build a reputation to get there, according to a national expert.

“I would say the payoff in the long run would take a lot longer than, say, somebody pulled in with a biotech plant,” said Perry Wong, senior managing economist for the California-based Milken Institute, which researches and advises communities on economic planning.

“But it’s something that can be developed into a niche. If you want to gain credibility, you have to have many, many researchers.”

Nationwide, cities that have harnessed the health care industry as a main economic driver have major medical research universities and medical centers or hospitals renowned for a
specific care that goes beyond what can be had at local hospitals, he said.

Gilbert and the Phoenix market in general don’t stand out as having either of those key success factors, but Gilbert could follow in the footsteps of Cleveland, a city that began what is now a renowned heart surgery center — the Cleveland Clinic — with one researcher and his vision, Wong said.

It could work if Gilbert earns a reputation that will attract new companies, as well as patients and doctors, and take advantage of retirees moving to Arizona, he said.

But, Wong added, if holistic medicine will be a focus, Gilbert needs to broaden support from the medical industry that, at times, balks at alternative care.

Greg Tilque, director of the town’s economic development, said the health care market is a strong one that would outlive market trends that have died in other cities.

“We’d like to take it as far as we can,” Tilque said. “Regional for sure. So if somebody’s looking at Arizona, they’re going to say, we ought to locate in Gilbert. That would be our goal.”

The health care industry is among the fastest growing sectors of the nation’s economy, increasing from 7 percent of the Gross Domestic Product in 1970 to 14 percent in 2002, according to a 2003 Milken Institute study. By 2011, it is expected to account for 17 percent of the GDP.

**JOBS IN GILBERT**

Gilbert’s new hospitals have already added much-needed professional and higher-paying jobs to a town that has long watched its residents brave congested commutes to work in other Valley locales.

While health care has not been thought of historically as a niche market, it tends to bring in higher salaries than other job sectors, studies report.

In a January report, Arizona State University economists calculated average hospital employee salaries in Maricopa County are $56,100, compared with an average $49,051 for all industries.

“On the service side, they not only provide a great service to the community and support the health of the community,” said Becky Kuhn, CEO of Banner Gateway Medical Center at U.S. 60 and Higley Road in Gilbert, “but health care jobs are really wonderful jobs that support the stability of the economy.”

Antonio Botta worked 18 years in the semiconductor business before coming to Mercy Gilbert Medical Center, where he is senior engineer with plant operations.

He’s among many Gilbert residents taking advantage of the town’s health care growth and the shorter commutes and security it provides.

“I like that if you’re in health care, your job is pretty safe,” he said.

Mercy Gilbert ICU nurses Laura Milton and Robin Rogers relocated to Gilbert from Seattle and Indiana. As working mothers, they say Gilbert was ideal — it has new hospitals with
the highest technology and innovative programs, and it’s a family oriented community.

“I know a lot of nurses are really interested in coming here to Gilbert,” Milton said.

http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/story/103756