

FOUNDATIONS

BUSINESS & INDUSTRY

Starr Regional to double ICU beds at Athens facility



DPA File Photo

Shown here are Starr Regional Medical Center, city and county officials during the groundbreaking ceremony.

The intensive care capacity at Starr Regional Medical Center's Athens campus is set to double in the next year.

Starr Regional Medical Center (SRMC) announced in February a \$12 million expansion of its intensive care unit (ICU) to improve access to critical care services within McMinn County. Construction is estimated to be completed in early 2026.

Once construction is complete, the ICU will occupy the newly constructed space and the number of ICU rooms will be increased from five to 10 rooms. The unit will feature private rooms, a modernized design and upgraded technology that supports enhanced patient care for the most vulnerable and critical patients so they can receive the care they need closer to home.

The project also will create a new waiting area for families and two additional beds for the medical surgical unit.

"This is truly an exciting time for Starr Regional

Medical Center, the community and the entire region we serve. The project increases our capacity for intensive care patients as well as medical surgical patients," SRMC Chief Executive Officer (CEO) John McLain said. "Our mission is making communities healthier and it guides everything we do. Enhancing our critical care services and investing in new technology and capabilities to better serve our family, friends and neighbors demonstrates our commitment to this mission. We will keep the community informed of the project's progress and we appreciate your patience during the construction process."

SRMC hosted a groundbreaking ceremony on Wednesday to celebrate the beginning of the project.

"It's a really great project we have going here," McLain said during the groundbreaking.

He noted that the COVID-19 pandemic "high-lighted capacity issues in rural healthcare" and stressed to officials that they needed to find a way

to expand.

"When our critical care capacity was taxed, we ended up with patients and their family having to go to other communities that we normally, if we just had capacity, could have taken care of those patients here," he said.

The expansion was made possible through a grant from the Tennessee Department of Health's Healthcare Resiliency Program, a competitive grant program designed to expand Tennessee's capacity in delivering quality healthcare services, as well as modernize and transform healthcare in rural communities across the state.

Starr Regional Medical Center was awarded a \$6.4 million grant for the ICU expansion project and Tele-ICU advancement.

"Our mission is to make our community healthier and this project goes a long way to do that, providing the space, the environment and also the people that will work in that environment," he said.



DPA File Photo

Shown here is the area where the ICU at Starr Regional Medical Center's Athens campus will expand.

Athens native to oversee east region for TVA

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) recently announced that a native of Athens has been named as the new east regional executive. Athens native Bert Robinson has been appointed as the TVA's new executive leader of the agency's east region, which focuses on serving customers and communities across East Tennessee as well as north Georgia, western North Carolina and southwest Virginia.

"I'm very excited for this position," Robinson expressed. "I was born, raised and educated in the east region. I'm from Athens and most of my family still lives in Athens, so I'm excited for this role, this opportunity and the opportunity to work closely with our customers, other stakeholders and to share the good things that TVA is doing."

Robinson has been with TVA for 17 years and has made many achievements in strategic planning, incident management, talent development and strategic alliances.

"I spent a large part of my childhood on Watts Bar and you could always look down the river and see the cooling towers at Watts Bar Nuclear Plant and that always fascinated me," he stated while reflecting on what sparked his interest in working with TVA. "I learned throughout my professional career and then I had the opportunity to work for the TVA, which has been a fantastic career move."

According to a news

release submitted to The DPA, Robinson most recently served as the east region's director of government and community relations, "assembling and mentoring high-performing teams that provide guidance to TVA leaders on the nuanced political and stakeholder environment within which the agency operates."

"This position is relatively new, about three years old," Robinson stated. "We recently shifted to a regional model which has allowed us to be closer to the communities that we serve and to show up in different ways in the communities."

Reflecting on his past, Robinson recalled

all of the things that helped direct him towards a career with TVA.

"I was educated at McMinn County High School, came up through Ingleside Elementary and then what is now known as Athens City Middle School where I had absolutely fantastic teachers," Robinson expressed. "Debbie Hamilton, Linda McGill and Judy Davis, all of these people had a great impact on my life and I very much appreciate what they did for me in setting me up for success in the future."

For higher education, Robinson went to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. In addition

to earning his bachelor's degree from UT, Robinson is a graduate of the TVA/Vanderbilt University Leadership and Management for Accelerated Performance program. He also graduated from the TVA Executive Candidate Leadership Program and completed both the three-year Public Affairs Institute and the Leadership Knoxville Flagship Program in 2017.

"My parents also had a huge impact on my life," he said. "They ran a business here in town, real estate business, Century 21 franchise.

I'm the youngest of six kids so I had a lot of role models in my life."

Robinson still plays an active role outside of the TVA as an Eagle Scout and active community volunteer. He serves on the Board of the American Red Cross of East Tennessee, volunteers with Leadership in Knoxville, sits on the board of the East Tennessee Economic Council and is also an institutional liaison to the Tennessee Valley Corridor.

He enjoys many hobbies such as spending time with his family, traveling, golfing and

aviation.

"We certainly appreciate our partnership here locally with AUB (Athens Utilities Board), I think they do a fantastic job of providing low cost, reliable power to the citizens of Athens in this area and TVA certainly appreciates our working relationship with AUB and all of our customers," Robinson expressed. "Just having the opportunity to work in this capacity and be closer to the communities that we serve is really a great opportunity for me and I'm very proud of this opportunity."



Robinson

Casteel talks national first for building in Athens

Walmart helped make the City of Athens first in the nation in a business category.

Athens Community Development Director Anthony Casteel included a historic note in a building report he presented to the Athens City Council in the second quarter of 2024.

He opened the building report by noting that more than \$6 million was re-invested into the city through building projects in town with Walmart's addition leading the way at \$1.1 million.

On Walmart's addition, Casteel picked out the historic note for the business and the town.

"This was a special project that Athens was chosen by Walmart out of all their locations," Casteel told the council. "This addition will be the first commercial 3D printed concrete building constructed in America. That's pretty special for our community to be chosen for this project."

Casteel said it is a credit to his staff for being willing to approve a project like this.

"I also want to commend my inspectors for embracing new technology and always being open to new construction methods being introduced into the building sector," Casteel said. "It speaks

volumes to their training and dedication to the job and your support and funding so we'll be able to do that."

During January's council meeting, Casteel brought the project up again, noting that Walmart ultimately invested \$3 million in the expansion, making it the largest project of the year in the city. It was followed by the plasma center building construction beside Hobby Lobby at \$2.7 million, DENSO expansion at \$2.4 million, Bull Products construction at \$2 million and Big Lots parking lot work at \$1.8 million.

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DENSO announces 200 jobs, \$100 million investment in expansion



DPA File Photo

People from across the community mingled prior to the announcement of an expansion of DENSO Manufacturing Athens Tennessee. Shown here is a group of people that include Tennessee Wesleyan University President Dr. Tyler Forrest.

The local area is receiving a big economic boost after an announcement at DENSO Manufacturing Athens Tennessee late last year.

With city, county and state representatives on hand, officials announced a \$100 million capital expansion project that is expected to lead to the creation of 200 new jobs. The project is planned to create 54,560 square feet of new production space and renovation of existing areas.

"Today is a great day for Athens and McMinn County," Tennessee Department of

Economic and Community Development (TNECD) Deputy Commissioner Allen Borden said. "This has been one of our great cities, great counties. To have effective economic development, it takes a lot of people working together. The impact this great Japanese company has had on our state is profound."

According to DENSO Athens President Marty Deschenes, this expansion will cover two areas: a new heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) production line and a line of elec-

tronics products for vehicles.

The HVAC work is "in the very early stages," he said, while the electronic products line should be able to start up "in the next couple of years."

"This insulates us from volatility in the market as it changes" from combustion engines to electric vehicles, Deschenes explained.

"We're obviously very, very excited about this," Borden added. "This means a lot of economic growth."

The company first opened its Athens doors in 1997, producing components for

vehicle ignition, exhaust and gasoline delivery systems.

"I've gotten to see DENSO grow," McMinn County Mayor John Gentry, who has been in his position since 2002, said. "I've gotten to see DENSO impact not just my county, but my friends' lives as well. I can go through this plant right now and I guarantee you I will know dozens and dozens of employees. It's part of my extended family now."

Gentry said those employees who work in on the production floor are what make the successful business go.

"We thank them for making this day possible," he said.

Athens Mayor Steve Sherlin called this a "significant milestone" for the company, city and county as it will "pave the way for future generations and a robust and sustainable workforce."

Sherlin said while this is big news for the company, it is equally big news for the citizens of the local area.

"We celebrate not just the expansion, but also the opportunity it creates in Athens and McMinn County," he said.

DENSO recognized for efforts to aid veterans

DENSO's Athens location was honored during a ceremony in February for its efforts in supporting local veterans.

The Tennessee Department of Veterans Services (TDVS) has welcomed DENSO's Athens and Maryville locations into the Tennessee Veteran Ready Business Recognition Program (VRBP).

The Athens location earned a Silver Level recognition and Maryville received a Bronze Level recognition.

A ceremony was held with representatives from the State of Tennessee, DENSO, McMinn County and the City of Athens on hand to celebrate the achievement by the company.

"We were honored to be able to achieve the silver level award," DENSO Production Manager Matt Scott, who is a veteran, said.

Scott ended his time in the service in 1997 and noted that, when he was out, he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. That's when DENSO came into the picture for him.

"I work for a great



DPA File Photo

Tennessee Department of Veteran Services Director of State Operations Stephen Bell hands off the silver level award to members of the DENSO Manufacturing Athens Tennessee staff during a ceremony.

company that supports our veterans," he said. "This company plays an active role for our veterans. We look forward to achieving the gold level here soon."

Athens Mayor Larry Eaton also spoke, noting that he's happy to see the company honored for their efforts.

"DENSO is a role model for other businesses in our area," he said. "DENSO, thank you for honoring our veterans."

The Athens location earned the honor for efforts to recruit, hire and retain military service members, veterans and their families. By joining the program, participants can access educational tools and resources that help them continue to foster work environments where the veteran community can thrive.

"Every day our team helps employers take their recruit-

ment and support of veterans to the next level," Tennessee Department of Veterans Services (TDVS) Director of State Operations Stephen Bell said. "But this work is only possible when job creators like DENSO share that commitment. We appreciate all that the DENSO teams in Athens and Maryville have done, and continue to do, to help veterans find

success and grow their careers."

Initiatives undertaken by both the Athens and Maryville locations include creating opportunities for veterans to connect and collaborate at work, supporting veteran-related causes in the community and participating in job fairs for individuals with service backgrounds.

"At DENSO we're focused on helping

all our team members pursue their passions and grow their skills so everyone can support our mission of contributing to a better world," Athens facility President Dave Grimmer said. "In this work, we've found that service members and veterans often have the drive and talent to excel in our industry. We'll continue to seek ways to help them grow with DENSO and in our communities."

TDS launches fiber internet across Niota



DPA File Photo

TDS held a launch event for fiber internet availability in Niota. Shown here is a ribbon cutting for it with TDS, city, county and Athens Area Chamber of Commerce representatives in attendance.



DPA File Photo

McMinn County Mayor John Gentry speaks to those in attendance at the TDS fiber internet launch in Niota.

More than 1,000 homes across Niota will have fiber internet access available after an announcement by TDS in 2024.

TDS Telecommunications held a launch party on the stage in downtown Niota to announce the beginning of fiber internet service in the area.

In attendance at the event were TDS, city and county officials as well as Athens Area Chamber of Commerce representatives.

"We are thrilled to be in Niota celebrating TDS' fiber network," TDS Senior Manager of State Government Affairs Bruce Mottern said. "These high speed broadband services will provide tremendous benefits to the Niota community by delivering reliable, world class connections that everyone is looking for."

Mottern noted that 1,100 addresses will now have fiber internet available to them with a range of internet speeds up to 8GB and starting at up to 300Mbps.

"This fiber network and the availability of gig speeds will attract businesses and jobs; provide better connections for schools; work from home opportunities; and better

access to health care and entertainment," Mottern noted. "In short, it will improve the quality of life for Niota residents."

Niota Mayor Lois Preece noted the importance of the announcement to the town.

"We're lucky to get this TDS internet," she said. "It's another way Niota continues to improve. We just keep moving forward and I want to thank TDS for giving us a shove we needed."

McMinn County Mayor John Gentry noted that no federal or state grant money was part of this investment by TDS.

"A few years ago we didn't think internet would be mentioned with the same importance as electricity," he said. "Today we are super excited to have a company like TDS step to the plate."

Gentry added that McMinn County has "grown more the past three years than the previous 25 years" and one of the big reasons for that is increased internet availability.

The event closed out with TDS presenting checks of \$1,000 each to the Niota Rural Fire Department and Niota Youth Association.

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