

Proposed hospitals will fill trauma void across Pinal County

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After years of having only one hospital to serve an area larger than Connecticut, Pinal County soon will have two more emergency rooms to handle its health-care needs.

Idaho-based Initiatives [Healthcare](#) Inc. has announced plans to start refurbishing the former Central Arizona Medical Center in Florence, with plans to open the facility by the end of the year. The news comes weeks after Banner Health announced construction plans for a new hospital just east of Queen Creek.

Both hospitals will join the Casa Grande Regional Medical Center in serving the more than 300,000 residents of Pinal County.

With only the single hospital in Casa Grande, the need for emergency medical and health services has become increasingly important as Pinal's population has skyrocketed in the past three years.

The recent housing boom added 100,000 residents to the county, with some residents living 45 minutes away from the nearest emergency room.

Initial plans show the yet-to-be named hospital being refurbished in Florence will have three surgical rooms, an emergency room, 60 beds for long-term care and 25 beds for acute care, said Gary Faulkner, vice president for [business](#) operations at Initiatives Healthcare.

Initiatives will spend nearly \$9 million to renovate and bring the 90,000-square-foot building up to code.

"We think it will be money well spent to be able to serve the needs of the community," Faulkner said.

Florence welcomes the hospital's return. The town is at least 35 miles away from the nearest medical center.

In emergency situations, it takes 15 to 20 minutes to transportation patients by helicopter to the nearest hospital.

Florence has been without a hospital since 1999, when Central Arizona Medical Center closed because it wasn't making enough money.

Florence Mayor Tom Rankin, who's been working closely with developers to bring the hospital back, said the return of [emergency medical care](#) to the town could save lives or keep patients from further medical trauma.

Rankin had wanted a hospital back in Florence so badly that nearly a year ago he started wearing a ponytail, vowing to grow out his hair until there were solid signs the old medical center would be restored.

He recently lopped off his locks.

"The speed of medical treatment is going to be instrumental to the community with the growth," Rankin said. "It's going to make a heck of a difference."

Dr. Edward McEachern is one of the founding members of Initiatives Healthcare, which specializes in opening medical centers that are owned and managed by physicians.

Florence residents won't be the only ones who are expected to benefit from the renovated hospital, McEachern said.

About 130,000 live in the area the hospital expects to serve, which includes Coolidge, the Santan area and other Pinal County communities.

The Banner Ironwood Medical Center near Gantzel and Combs roads is expected to open in 2010.

The facility will start out with 24 beds but can expand to include more than 85 beds.