

New MRI scanner up and running at West River Health Services

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The new MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) machine has been functioning at West River Health Services since August 10 at 8 a.m. The machine and addition in total was a \$3 million project. (PHOTO BY COLE BENZ | The Record)

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With the push of the proverbial button, West River Health Services ventured into another advancement in patient care with the completion of a \$3 million project for a hospital addition and an in-house MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scanner.

West River and the staff welcomed the community to an open house for a chance to get a glimpse at the new addition and the machine.

Tours were given of the radiology department—led by the staff in the department—and it culminated with a peak at the large scanner.

As attendees wandered towards the MRI addition, they could see where the new portion of the building started—as visible by wood flooring in the entrance of the new section. The walls were littered with donation recognitions, some from businesses but many from [Hettinger](#) residents and their families. It was a true display of what the community thought of the addition.

This entire project began because of what West River Health Services Chief Executive Officer Jim Long would witness from his office chair. Long is positioned with a view of the parking lot, and week after week he would witness patients venturing out into the elements for a MRI scan in the back of the rented MRI truck. This sight was particularly disheartening during the winter months, when he would see people navigating the ice,

snow, cold and wind, with some patients having to battle the brutal winter from their wheelchair.

So Long started to explore some options.

His first thought was to find a way for the truck to back up closer to the building. Logistics proved that the idea wasn't feasible, because structural changes would still need to be made to fit the truck.

Long's next thought was to place a modular structure on the grounds of the hospital, but that method would still have required patients to walk outside.

Finally Long called in his staff and asked them one question—how many patients do they send away for MRI scans at other facilities?

As Long went around the table that number began to add up, and it was becoming apparent that the volume would justify putting an in-house machine at West River hospital.

"It's very clear that if we had the service here, there's enough need for it that it would be used," Long said.

The contractor selected was Ainsworth-Benning out of South Dakota and planning began. Long applauded their work and most notably how they were able to keep the area in front of the emergency room clear during construction.

With the cost of the project being so high, Long knew they would need to lean on fundraising for a portion of the bill. The community response generated over half a million dollars.

"The fundraising really helped keep it affordable," said Long

The initial goal was \$500,000, and Long said that they will make that mark and exceed it. Even after the completion of the project donations are still coming in.

West River hosted a plethora of fundraising events, including the adult prom held late in the spring. Ted Uecker was instrumental in organizing many events and lining up donors that supported the addition.

Patients should feel a higher level of comfort with the new scanner. The new machine has a larger bore—the hole where patients are inserted into for the scan—so those that suffer even a mild case of claustrophobia can be relieved of some stress during a scan. Also helping with claustrophobia is that the addition has windows on one wall, a luxury

many facilities don't afford their patients. The machine has the capability to adjust the noise it makes during a scan, though the entire scanning process will be longer if that setting is selected.

The system also has the option of music. Patients can either bring their own music, or select something from a library at the hospital.

The machine is built by GE and is 1.5 tesla in strength (tesla is a unit of magnet flux density). Radiologist Mark Kristy said the strength is comparable to a magnet on a crane.

Kristy said the new machine will allow scans of smaller body parts, it can compensate for patient movement and has greater capabilities of picking up smaller bleeds particularly in the brain.

"We're real pleased with the results, I think our patients really like it, I know the doctors do," Kristy said. "I think we're really enhancing our patient care by being able to image them here, getting good quality images and giving them an interpretation that their doctor can use for their healthcare, so I'm quite pleased."

U.S. Rep. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., was able to see the new addition and machine, and lauded the fact that they were able to upgrade their facility and serve the rural area as best as it can.

"It's huge, because what it does is it maintains the viability of a critical access hospital," Cramer said.

"You maintain the integrity of excellence along with the accessibility of a rural community."

The MRI scanner should serve more than just Hettinger. West River Health Services has satellite clinics in [Mott](#), [New England](#), [Scranton](#), [Bowman](#) and [Lemmon](#), S.D., and Long thinks that the area in which patients come to West River could stretch farther than those cities.

"We look at it as we have 25,000 square miles of service area for our patients to come from," Long said.

He added that when you get farther away from Hettinger, patients can easily go the other way to another facility. But in Hettinger, patients can avoid the hustle and bustle of busy Dickinson or Bismarck traffic, which Long said makes a difference especially with the older patients.

The important part of this, according to Long, is patient service and doing it better. He added that he's happy with how it came out and glad to see the high level of community interest.