

University Hospital Turns 20

It all happened in one day – Valentine’s Day of 1986: the 61-year-old University Hospital known as “Old Main” was vacated and, after 800 training sessions to prepare, its approximately 5,000 staff members and last 400 patients, along with 3,000 truckloads of equipment, moved with military precision into the new, sleek, 11-story, 848-bed hospital known to that point as the Replacement Hospital Project, or RHP. The adjacent A. Alfred Taubman Health Care Center, with 120 outpatient clinics, also opened, reflecting the trend toward more outpatient care.

But that remarkable one-day move was preceded by five long years of assiduous planning and five more of construction, involving the efforts of countless University officials and staff, the legislative and executive branches of state government, architects, contractors, designers, inspectors and vendors.

“The whole process was handled very well by the University,” says Gary M. Owen, then a member of the state house of representatives from Michigan’s 22nd District and a member of the Joint Capital Outlay Committee whose support was crucial to approval by the state. “The foresight and planning were remarkable. The U-M predicted that the RHP would be an economic boon to the state and county and would move the University to the forefront of health care delivery. Both occurred and, if anything, I think the University underestimated the positive impact the new hospital would have.”

For Harold T. Shapiro, Ph.D., then president of the U-M, there was the occasional sleepless night. The state of Michigan was facing financial crisis, inflation was soaring, the hospital was in dire financial straits, and many found it difficult to believe that building a new hospital would be cheaper than updating Old Main. “For many alumni, the ghosts of their great mentors still walked those hallowed halls,” Shapiro says about the attachment many felt with the aging hospital. “In my mind, the future of the Medical School was at stake.”



The University Hospital construction site in 1981, looking southwest, with C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital and Old Main in the background

“Old Main was a constant drain on funds to address structural problems and accreditation issues,” adds Owen, who served as speaker of the state house of representatives from 1983 to 1988. “That’s why the RHP was necessary.”

It was also a time when then-Governor William G. Milliken proposed a bold new initiative known as the State Building Authority which would reduce the need for bond issues for capital projects and allow public entities to pay for projects on an annual basis rather than all at once. Owen and his fellow committee members worked with Milliken on a compromise bill that established the SBA and included funds for the RHP.

Owen, a Democrat, has high praise for Milliken, a Republican. “He has always had a deep-down commitment to doing what was right. There was less partisanship and ‘agenda’ with

Governor Milliken. A lot of the right people were in place at the right time to move the project forward.” Two of those people, U-M thoracic surgeon Herbert Sloan, M.D. (Residency 1949), and commercial real estate developer A. Alfred Taubman, led fund-raising efforts that supplemented state and University funds to pay for the replacement hospital.

Getting the hospital built took a “willingness to shoulder a great deal of risk,” Shapiro says, “and a determination that the future would be the carrier of even greater possibilities if we had the courage of our convictions and a willingness to carry forward only that portion of our traditions that would continue to serve patients, medical education and biomedical research.” [m](#)

—Rick Krupinski



- 1 John D. Forsyth, CEO of the U-M Hospitals (1983-1996), shows the completed Taubman Health Care Center to University President Harold Shapiro at the dedication in 1986.
- 2 The familiar arch entrance of Old Main
- 3 Real estate developer A. Alfred Taubman
- 4 Former U-M thoracic surgeon Herbert Sloan
- 5 Opal Glenn was the first new patient to occupy a room at University Hospital.
- 6 The “new” University Hospital. Today, the U-M Health System employs nearly 18,000 people at its

- 7 William G. Milliken, Michigan’s governor from 1969 to 1982. Now living in Traverse City, Milliken served as governor of Michigan longer than anyone.
- 8 Gary M. Owen was a member of the Michigan state house of representatives from 1973-1988.

For photos and more comments from Harold Shapiro and Gary Owen: www.medicineatmichigan.org/magazine