

Parking and pills

OKC Council votes to open free clinic for city employees

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THE JOURNAL RECORD

OKLAHOMA CITY – City Hall is holding back about 2,000 square feet on the first floor of the new Arts District parking garage to provide free health care for employees, rather than retail space.

The City Council decided Tuesday to open a \$1.33 million health clinic to serve employees who are on the city's health plan and their families.

The program managed by Tulsa-based CareATC and approved by the City Council is expected to help reduce the city's insurance policy costs by providing free services for most common health problems, Personnel Director Diana Berry said.

"It's going to provide tremendous value; it's more than just an employee benefit," she said. "We hope to effect a savings on our medical plan overall. If our employees and eligible retirees start receiving services at the clinic as opposed to going to their physicians and the more costly health insurance plan, we will see costs drop."

The \$24.5 million garage with 800 parking spaces is slated to open fully by Nov. 4. It sits between City Hall and the municipal offices building on Main Street, within a block of the Oklahoma City Museum of Art and the downtown library. Berry said the clinic's proximity to city offices increases its value by reducing work schedule disruptions for employees.

The remaining 16,500 square feet on the first floor facing Colcord Drive has attracted the attention of businesses who want it for offices and restaurants, Embark parking authority spokesman Michael Scroggins said. Embark officials would not reveal details of contracts under negotiation, but Scroggins said the likely tenants are local companies, one of which is a coffee and sandwich shop.

Health care expenditures at state and local levels have doubled over the last 25 years to a total of about \$475 billion nationwide, according to a recent



The new Arts District parking garage in downtown Oklahoma City. PHOTO BY BRENT FUCHS

study presented by Donald Boyd at the Brookings Institution. Following current market trends, a baseline increase in expenditures of 1.2 percentage

points of gross domestic product over 20 years would equal total state and local government spending on police and prisons, Boyd wrote, and adjusting

budgets by that magnitude will undoubtedly raise difficult policy and political choices.

To keep insurance policy premiums down, cities like Edmond are shouldering the cost of providing treatment for chronic problems such as hypertension and diabetes, health assessments, minor acute illnesses and medication management. Edmond joined the movement last year when City Council members approved a similar contract with CareATC to manage a 900-square-foot clinic at a cost of \$800,000 per year. Two years earlier, Oklahoma County commissioners reported that the county's own clinic helped to drop its medical expenses by nearly \$1 million.

Oklahoma City officials required CareATC's contract to include performance standards. For example, the company has been tasked with reaching a 50-percent employee use rate by December 2017, a 20-percent reduction in the city's overall health care plan costs, and improvement of health conditions by 30 percent of participants. The company also will provide monthly reports on clinic use and patient satisfaction without revealing any confidential information.

The clinic will be open 40 hours per week, although the schedule has not been worked out yet, officials said. It will be available to current Oklahoma City health plan members, including non-Medicare-eligible retirees and dependents at least 2 years old. Berry said CareATC will provide physicians unaffiliated with the city's insurance carriers to avoid potential conflicts of interest. Participants will not be charged for clinic services, which may include generic pharmaceuticals.

City Manager Jim Couch said in a council memo that his staff negotiated a cost that is almost 50 percent less than the \$2.5 million originally proposed by CareATC. Fees are fixed for the first 24 months of the agreement and may increase a maximum of 3 percent annually thereafter.