The Need for an On-Site Helipad

Vail Valley Medical Center (VVMC) has proposed a $100 million Master Facility Plan to modernize the nearly 50-year old medical center. If approved by the Town of Vail, this plan will improve the healthcare available to the Valley, physically improve the campus in ways that will benefit the quality of life of the community, and make Vail a center of health and wellness.

One of the proposed improvements is to relocate the helipad to an on-site, rooftop location where it will have direct access to the hospital and Emergency Department. This improvement was not only specifically requested by the Town of Vail, but it is also one that is necessary for the health of trauma and critical care patients for whom seconds count.

The Problem

VVMC’s helipad is currently located across S. Frontage Rd. from the hospital campus. Getting patients to and from the helicopter requires a transfer by ambulance. This arrangement:

- Adds time – between 20 and 60 minutes – at an extraordinarily critical moment in a trauma or emergency situation.
- Adds risk to the patient because trauma and emergency patients are typically connected to a variety of medical equipment and critical medications and any time that equipment is moved, a device may become disconnected or an IV line lost.
- Adds risk and inconvenience to the community because these transfers take Eagle County Ambulance District crew out of circulation to handle the transfer and the Vail Police Department is required to close S. Frontage Rd. during the transfer, taking police crew out of circulation and stopping traffic.
- Adds cost to the patient because by law, these patients can be moved only by specially trained medical professionals.

The Solution

VVMC has proposed moving the helipad on site because doing so will save lives and improve medical outcomes.

The specific location on the campus is still being evaluated, but VVMC is working closely with the Town of Vail staff, neighbors and community members to listen to needs and concerns. We have also hired some of the country’s best aviation experts to identify a location that is close to the Emergency Department, meets aeronautical and regulatory standards, and poses the least possible impact on neighbors.
Frequently Asked Questions

How often are helicopter transfers required?

VVMC averages 73 helicopter transports per year, or about one every five days. Ambulance transfers are the preferred method of transfer because of the decreased risk to the patient, reduced cost, and reduced inconvenience and risk to the general public. In 2013, of 344 patients who were transferred to another hospital, 271 (79%) were driven by ambulance.

What kinds of patients and circumstances require helicopter transport?

These are patients who suffered trauma, stroke, cardiac arrests, and high-risk OB and neonatal patients. The physician is the one who decides the situation is so dire that it requires a helicopter transfer. These patients are typically transferred to specialized medical centers like Denver Health, Children’s Hospital, St. Mary’s Medical Center and Swedish Medical Center.

Is this an issue that primarily affects visitors to the Vail Valley?

No. In 2013, slightly more than half of the helicopter transfers were Eagle County residents.

What will be the impact on neighbors?

Sound abatement procedures will minimize the less than 45 seconds of take-off and landing, and there are no lights associated with the helipad that would cast any “beams” into the neighborhood. Any potential effects upon neighboring residential, office and educational areas are mitigated by the distance of the heliport landing pad and are further minimized by the flight path which is designed to overfly commercial properties and roadways.

Isn’t it unsafe for a helipad to be so close to residential properties?

There are countless examples around the world of helipads in crowded urban environments and the safety track record is outstanding. There have been no civilian or general public deaths (people on the ground) resulting from a medical helicopter or heliport in the past 30 years in the country. The modern helicopters that service Vail have advanced safety equipment including night vision, terrain avoidance, traffic avoidance and satellite tracking along with excellent performance capabilities and a high reliability record.

Is Vail’s high altitude a risk to helicopter flight?

There are 43 heliports in Colorado above 8,200 feet and pilots approved to fly into VVMC are highly trained and qualified.

Why not move the helipad down valley to Avon or Edwards?

Moving the helipad down valley will only increase the time, risk and cost to the patient.