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By Clayton Park

‘Google-style’ HQ campus finally moving forward in Holly Hill

HOLLY HILL — Nearly three years after announcing plans to develop a “Google-style” headquarters campus on the site of the former Holly Hill Middle School, Synergy Billing is finally set to break ground this spring.

The medical billing and coding company, currently based in Daytona Beach, unveiled renderings for its planned Fountainhead at Holly Hill campus Tuesday morning at a breakfast meeting of the Holly Hill Chamber of Commerce.

“We’re breaking ground no later than the second quarter,” said Jeannette Duerr, the company’s vice president of communications and marketing. Duerr was also installed at the meeting as the chamber’s board president for 2018.

Duerr said the initial phase of the Fountainhead project will include renovating the property’s two remaining buildings — the old media center and gymnasium which will be connected by a covered walkway. The initial phase also calls for constructing three adjoining new buildings in front of the former media center.

The two existing buildings are expected to be completed by this fall, which would then become the new home of the Synergy Career Academy, a school for students interested in careers in medical billing and coding. The former media center will also include a coffee shop for employees. The former gym, which is behind the media center, will house a fitness center for employees as well as a daycare for their children.

Synergy Billing has purchased 120 workout machines and equipment for the fitness center from the old Club Boom in Ormond Beach.

The new buildings are slated to be completed in early 2019, with the two-story central building in front becoming the company’s new executive offices. The two new 12,000-square-foot wings will accommodate billing and coding personnel. Each wing will be able to accommodate up to 190 workers, Duerr said. The south wing would be filled immediately upon completion with the north wing to be filled at a later date when the company needs the space.

The total square footage of the project's initial phase will be 54,000 square feet — six times the size of 9,000-square-foot space Synergy Billing currently leases in the Tomoka Commerce Center at 1410 LPGA Blvd.

The former Holly Hill Middle School property is at 1200 Center Ave., just north of LPGA Boulevard and extends north to Walker Street.

The estimated cost of the initial phase is \$5.8 million, confirmed CEO Jayson Meyer, who founded Synergy Billing in 2006.

Synergy Billing currently employs 120 workers, but while its revenues have steadily risen, its ability to add workers has been slowed by its lack of space. The company also leases three office units in The Market commercial complex at Second Street and Riverside Drive in Holly Hill, which serves as a temporary home for the Synergy Career Academy.

Synergy Billing is eligible to receive performance-based economic incentives from the state and Volusia County if it makes good on its pledge to create at least 213 jobs in five years that pay an average of nearly \$40,000 annually. The county's matching portion is up to \$213,000.

The company is also eligible for community redevelopment area reimbursement funds on money it spends to develop Fountainhead by the end of the city's tax year in 2026.

"It's to my financial advantage to do it sooner than later," said Meyer in a phone interview on Tuesday, although he added that the future phases, which include 88 apartment units and a multi-tenant office building, will be "dictated by market demand."

Duerr said the company expects to grow at least 500 workers by the end of 2021, far exceeding the incentives agreement's hiring target.

Synergy Billing has hired landscape architect Cindy MacKay of Land Images in Ocala to work on the Fountainhead project. McKay formerly designed the landscaping for the Epcot theme park at Disney World. Her designs for Fountainhead include a large fountain and monument sign on the northwest corner of Center Avenue and LPGA Boulevard, the south end of the headquarters campus. The main entrance to the campus on Center Avenue would be tree-lined and would include several smaller fountains as well as a monument sign, Duerr said. The campus will also have an entrance on the north side along Walker Street.

The company has hired Holly Hill furniture maker American Technical Furniture to create custom-designed prototypes of office cubicles for its future headquarters which will be tested by Synergy Billing employees in the coming weeks.

"(Synergy Billing CEO Jayson Meyer) wants it Google-style, with bright colors and curves," said Greg Schmidt, American Technical Furniture's regional sales manager.

Nick Conte Jr., the city's economic development director, hailed Fountainhead as a "transformational project for the city and this region," adding that it gives the city an opportunity to attract businesses in the surrounding area that can provide support services.

The Fountainhead development, upon full buildout, is expected to cost \$25 million, Meyer confirmed. Future phases will add a business incubator and office spaces for other businesses, a community health clinic, apartment units for employees and their families, as well as walking trails and a water feature that will include an outdoor deck.

Meyer in August paid the city \$564,000 to purchase 9.4 acres along Center Avenue that includes the school's old media center and gymnasium. Demolition work on the interiors of the two buildings also began in August.

Meyer has an option to purchase the rest of the former school property from the city for \$60,000 an acre.

In an interview with The News-Journal in July 2015, when plans for Fountainhead were first announced, Meyer said he intended to relocate his employees, which numbered 85 at the time, into the renovated school buildings by the end of that year.

Upon finally completing the purchase of the initial portion of the campus last summer, company officials said they expected to move into the two existing buildings either by the end of December or early this year.

Meyer on Tuesday acknowledged he underestimated how long it would take to obtain the necessary permits. "There were times where I didn't understand why this was taking so long," he said. "It's made me a more patient man."

The city commission is scheduled to vote on the final designs for the project's initial phase at its Feb. 13 meeting, Duerr said.

Financing for the project is being provided in part by a bridge loan from two local entrepreneurs: Mike Panaggio, the CEO of Daytona Beach direct-marketing company DME Holdings, and Ty Lohman, one of the former owners of Lohman Funeral Homes.

"We haven't really changed our plans, we've accelerated them," Meyer said of the decision to start construction of the three new buildings this spring, as opposed to waiting until completing renovation of the existing buildings. He said his company needs the extra space sooner than anticipated.