

Officials break ground on new cancer center

BY JOHN MCMILLAN

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GONZALES — Louisiana has the second-highest death rate from cancer in the United States, not because of the environment, but because of a lack of facilities to prevent and treat the disease, the president of Mary Bird Perkins Cancer Center said Friday.

Todd Stevens told those attending the groundbreaking ceremonies for the new Mary Bird Perkins center being built in a partnership with St. Elizabeth Hospital on La. 30 in Gonzales that the center will be dedicated to removing that cause of cancer deaths by bringing "high-quality care and treatment" to Ascension Parish.

Dee LeJeune, president and chief executive officer of St. Elizabeth, told the gathering there is a "great need" in Ascension for the new treatment facility.

With the addition of the more than \$6 million Mary Bird Perkins facility, "we will be expanding our services to expand our mission," LeJeune said.

Plans call for the center to be open in late summer or early fall.

Stevens said the facility will have all the equipment and advanced technology available in the Baton Rouge center, including a "high-energy linear accelerator utilizing image guided radiation therapy.

"It is all state-of-the-art," Stevens said.

Gonzales Mayor Johnny Berthelot praised both St. Elizabeth and Mary Bird Perkins for filling a need in the Gonzales area.

Parish President Tommy Martinez, state Rep. Elton Aubert, D-Vacherie, and several Ascension Parish Council members also attended the ceremonies.