

Westbrook's Rock Row starts next phase of development with medical campus

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By Hannah LaClaire

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A rendering of the main entrance to the medical campus at Rock Row in Westbrook. *Courtesy Waterstone Properties*

Rock Row, the sprawling, mixed-use complex under development in Westbrook, breaks ground Wednesday on a medical and research campus, ushering in the next phase for the \$700 million project that so far has brought in primarily retail tenants.

New England Cancer Specialists will anchor the 200,000-square-foot, two-building campus, designed to be a destination for healing through a wide range of medical practices.

Other tenants will include Rayus Imaging, Saco Bay Physical Therapy and integrative health services including massage, reiki and acupuncture.

The holistic, wellness-centered approach to care is something the oncology group hopes will spread to other clinics, said Claire Cote, chief operations officer of New England Cancer Specialists.

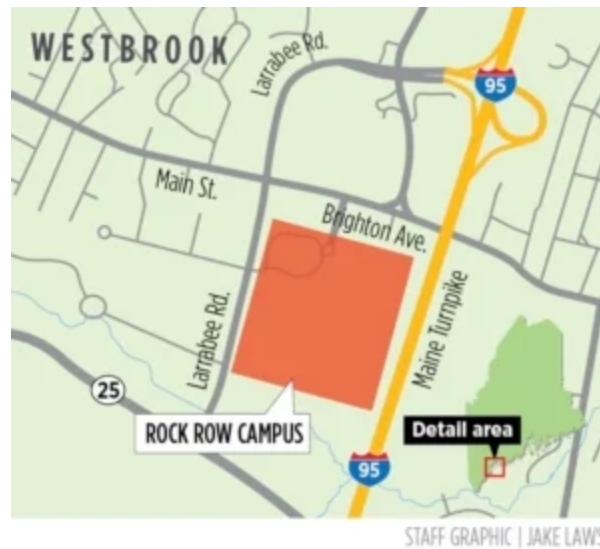
“We’re changing the focus for (New England Cancer Specialists) from a place where you can get treatment for cancer to a place where you can get healing for cancer,” she said.

Josh Levy, principal of the developer, Waterstone Properties Group, said his firm has been working to make sure the center doesn’t feel too sterile or clinical.

A partner with the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, NECS is the largest medical oncology group in the northern New England region and serves more than 10,000 patients.

The new, 40,000-square-foot site will consolidate the two existing NECS practices in Scarborough. The Kennebunk and Topsham locations will remain open.

The communities of Windham and Westbrook are growing rapidly, making Rock Row the perfect new home for the practice, Cote said.



She said she's excited to see the fully realized vision for the medical campus and to be able to offer many services in what will essentially be a one-stop shop.

"It will allow you to come to one place to get everything, not eight different places," she said. "It's everything coming to me versus me going to everything."

Aside from the additional services, the new center will feature a healing garden and access to miles of trails for patients, caregivers and staff to use.

The center will provide the kind of care patients have traveled to Boston for, but closer to home, Cote said.

"As a staff person, cancer is a heavy field," she said. The ability to take a break, get some fresh air and go for a walk or run on the trails or around Rock Row's grounds will allow doctors and nurses to "reset" before finishing a shift.

Levy said the emphasis on health and wellness also will include a "food as medicine" program in collaboration with Foundation4Love, NECS, Dana-Farber and Waterstone.

NECS plans to be in the new space by May 2024.

THE VERY BIG PICTURE

The medical campus is the second phase of a multiyear effort to build out Rock Row, a \$700 million, 2.7 million-square-foot, open-air collection of shops, restaurants, offices and residences designed around a 400-foot-wide quarry.

The 100-acre site is near the intersection of Main Street and Larrabee Road, between two Maine Turnpike exits and close to the Portland-Westbrook border.

The project is ultimately the “revitalization of an abandoned mining site on the front door of these two communities,” Levy said.

With Rock Row, Waterstone is attempting to create a community and promote healthy living.



An updated aerial rendering of the Rock Row complex, including the New England Cancer medical campus. *Rendering contributed by Waterstone Properties*

“We’re creating a place to be rather than a place to go,” he said.

Full construction will take another five years, and Levy expects Rock Row to ultimately support over 8,000 jobs, pump over \$1.6 billion annually into the economy and generate about \$35 million in annual tax revenue.

The original developer, Jeffrey Gove, first submitted plans for the complex in Westbrook in 2015. He proposed 500,000 square feet of retail space, including a 148,000-square-foot “wholesale club,” later announced as a Walmart.

In 2017, Gove sold the project to Waterstone, which vastly increased the development scope and dropped Walmart in favor of a Market Basket supermarket.

The first phase of the development efforts launched with that 80,000-square-foot store, which Levy said has been a wild success since it opened in August 2020. It is the No. 1 grocery store in Maine and among the top 25 in the country, he said.

Other well-known brands already at Rock Row include outdoor sports retailer REI, The Paper Store, a Chick-fil-A fast-food franchise, a Cowbell burger restaurant, Starbucks, Big Fin Poke and others.

After the medical campus, Levy said the group will focus on the first 350 of the planned 750 apartments. The studio, one-, two- and three-bedroom units will be market-rate, Levy said. There also are plans to build housing for graduate students at the University of New England.

Other phases include the build-out of Rock Row as an “innovation district” with Dirigo Innovation Hall, which will house research labs, incubator and co-working spaces for science and technology businesses.

There are also plans for a 550-seat food hall run by New York chef Akhtar Narwab, featuring over 15 menus. And the hall is separate from dozens of restaurants, breweries and entertainment options also in the works.

Waterstone also announced in 2020 that it is building the state’s largest meeting and convention center. The conference center will seat over 8,000 and feature a retractable wall that opens to outside seating. The hall will be built on the location of an outdoor live music and entertainment pavilion that opened in 2019 and suspended concerts and activities last September.

Altogether, Rock Row is an ambitious project for any developer, and perhaps especially for an out-of-state one. But Levy said he’s not deterred.

“We’re in this for the long term,” he said. “We don’t just come in and flip properties.”

He also said he and his team have been careful to avoid replicating downtown Westbrook and instead offer something new.

Michael Foley, mayor of Westbrook, agrees. He said maintaining the vibrancy of the city’s downtown was one of his primary concerns with the project.

When the Maine Mall opened in South Portland, downtown Westbrook suffered. Foley doesn’t want a repeat of that with Rock Row.

“We’re trying to develop a situation where all ships rise together,” Foley said.

The city has invested in some “flagship development,” including Vertical Harvest, a four-story indoor farm that is projected to employ nearly four dozen workers with intellectual disabilities and produce millions of pounds of microgreens for the area’s ever-expanding food scene.

That project also includes 50 to 60 apartments and a 400-space parking garage, which will allow Westbrook to consolidate its downtown parking, opening up other lots for commercial and residential development.

“I’m confident now that our downtown will remain vibrant,” Foley said.

With that assurance, Foley said the city is very excited about the plans for Rock Row, which he said present a huge economic development opportunity for the city and the region.

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