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DEVELOPMENT

Blue Cross workers ready for move to glass tower

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For weeks Tom Bovis has been fretting the details. Are the phones working? Has the right furniture arrived at the right place? Have the coffee pots made their way to the break rooms? Do the copy machines work?

On Oct. 9 the Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island vice president for corporate real estate and administrative services will know the answers. That's when about 1,000 Blue Cross employees expect to start moving into their new \$125 million headquarters in downtown Providence. Executives were expected to hold a ribbon cutting on Oct. 6 and the official opening is scheduled for Oct. 13.



PHOTO COURTESY BCBSRI

NEW HORIZONS: Blue Cross will occupy 300,000 square feet in the new building, center in the picture above. About 1,000 of the company's employees will work there.

"Construction I think was a lot easier than the last month," Bovis said during a tour of the 350,000-square-foot building last week.

The 13-story glass building overlooking Waterplace Park consolidates Blue Cross' offices currently spread among six Providence buildings. The new building includes a cafeteria, fitness center, training rooms, 145-seat call center and two green roofs. And Blue Cross says the consolidated operation will help it streamline its operations.

"Sometimes when you wanted to meet somebody you had to walk halfway across Providence," Blue Cross spokesman Chris Medici said.

No more. Blue Cross will occupy the first 12 floors – 300,000 square feet in all – of its new building and lease the top floor. Bovis said that before settling on the Providence location, the health insurance company considered renovating its existing buildings in the city. But the age of the structures, the oldest is 41 years old and the newest 29 years old, made that a potentially costly and complicated undertaking.

Then Blue Cross considered moving its operations to a suburban location. Providence officials and business groups, concerned about the economic impact of a Blue Cross exodus, pleaded with the company to stay. An existing tax stabilization agreement on the lot, combined with a consolidation of operations, is expected to save Blue Cross \$25 million over the next 23 years. And the construction-ready "pad" at Capital Center also promised to lower costs for the company. Those factors, and the nexus of transportation options in Providence, helped tip the scale in favor of the capital city.

The building's location next to the Amtrak and commuter rail station and along bus routes was critical, Bovis said. The company picks up the tab for employees to take the bus to

work and covers a portion of train tickets. Currently, about 300 of its employees utilize public transportation and Blue Cross executives worried that moving to a suburban location would decrease that number.

Providing access to public transportation became part of a larger initiative to design an environmentally friendly building. Architectural firm Symmes, Maini & McKee Associates included bicycle racks and preferred parking spaces for hybrid vehicles. The firm incorporated recycled construction materials where possible, installed energy-efficient mechanical systems and constructed a system to collect rainwater and use it for cooling systems.

Floor-to-ceiling glass windows let in natural light and sensors dim lights as necessary. Two green roofs feature vegetation that absorb water and reduce the heating effect of the large building. Blue Cross expects the building to meet silver Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, it not gold.

Blue Cross executives say the new office is just one example of how the company makes an economic impact in Providence.

A report commissioned by the company says its total economic impact in the state is nearly \$1 billion a year.

The company spent \$90 million on construction alone and employed many Rhode Island subcontractors and 100 percent union labor on the building project.

The economic impact also extends to the physical design on the building. Blue Cross intentionally built the cafeteria too small in an effort to encourage employees to patronize nearby eateries.