

## **MEOC dedicates PACE Center**

by IDA HOLYFIELD • Post Editor  
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**BIG STONE GAP** — From the main foyer to the side halls, through the food service area and back toward the rehab and occupational therapy departments, federal, state, regional and local dignitaries packed the \$3.7 million Mountain Empire PACE Center Monday morning for formal dedication ceremonies.



Many of those making their first visit were taken aback by what they saw, opting to sit rather than stand as they eyed a huge central corridor that ran the length of the building and bathed the space in sunlight from overhead skylights. Adjoining the corridor, they could see the nurses' station and examining rooms of the fully-staffed medical clinic. Many stood in the "meet and greet" area where staffers assist participants as they arrive by shuttle bus for their therapy, meals and recreation.



While the building is new, the concept is not. PACE, which stands for Program for All-Inclusive Care of the Elderly, has been a success in cities across the nation for many years. But Monday, visitors got to see what the nation's first rural PACE Center looks like and to meet its participants and staff.



### **AGING NATION**

What visitors were seeing will become a magnet for visiting teams from across the nation and around the world, Commissioner of the Virginia Department for the Aging Linda Nablo told those assembled. "When you think of cutting edge places in the country that are mapping the way to the future, you think California and New York,



rarely Big Stone Gap. But this is truly a cutting edge facility.

"We are all getting older, the whole Commonwealth, the nation and much of the world. Within this country, Virginia is actually aging a little faster than the average. We will double the number of citizens over the age of 60 in 30 years, and Virginia will have a higher proportion of citizens over the age of 65 than Florida does today."



As the population continues to age, PACE Centers will become vital factors in dealing with an aging nation, along with public transportation, which PACE provides, and universal housing, which MEOC advocates.

"This country is aging. We need to get ready for the challenges that presents. There will be an inevitable increase in chronic diseases and disabling conditions — arthritis, diabetes, heart disease . . . We cannot afford \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year for each nursing home bed. I am standing in the middle of one of the most exciting alternatives (for elder care)."

Virginia Director of Rural Development Ellen Davis said for her, MEOC PACE started as a priority, and has remained a priority, from her first day in office. "I had not been Director of Rural Development for 12 hours when I heard about this PACE Center," she said. "I was here for the funding announcement, for the ground breaking and now I'm here for the dedication." If she were permitted to have a favorite project statewide, this would be "a real strong possibility," she said.

"Our moms and dads are important. They deserve the best care we can provide plus things like beautiful sunlight, beautiful quilts on the walls. This facility has that and so much more. It shouts that this part of Southwest Virginia feels that way about our elders. It's an absolute privilege to have been a part of this."

Ninth District Rep. Rick Boucher, who with Davis, was instrumental in obtaining the various funding packages for PACE, noted the incredible progress made since the funding effort started five years ago. PACE today contracts with 160 physicians, hospitals and home health agencies to provide participant care. The 17,000 square foot facility can accommodate 110 participants daily and currently has a staff of 30 full-time employees who work with MEOC's transit drivers, personal care aides and food service employees.

The facility is a model of success for rural health care, he said. "It's the first step. Within a decade, given the success this center has demonstrated, you will see other PACE Centers in Southwest Virginia," he added.

Thanks to Boucher and other leaders, Maxwell noted, Southwest Virginia now has more telemedicine sites than any place in the country, and PACE is one of those sites.

Maxwell said it's been 36 years since the first steps were taken toward planning a PACE program, back in 1974. Three and a half decades later, she said, "The work is not done. We have to move forward."

"To those who say we are too small to be effective when striving toward a goal, I say you've never been in bed with a mosquito then. I might have been that mosquito, but all over MEOC, we've been plodding along, working toward this day."

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