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# St. Elizabeth looks to bring robotic surgery equipment to Tehama County



Attendees watch a demonstration of robotic surgery technology on the big screen. (Heather Taylor — Daily News)



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On Thursday evening, May 21, a crowd gathered around a large projector screen showing what appeared to be hoops or rings and colorful mounds or hills, with metallic arms moving the hoops from one hill to another. While the projector screen was huge, the actual action was taking place off to the side on a coaster-sized surface, and the rings were about the size of orthodontic rubber bands.

The operators controlling the arms were attendees who took turns sitting at a machine on the other side of the projector screen, where they placed their faces in an enclosed square so they could see the magnified and illuminated surface, and took hold of the controls operating the arms.

Some compared it to a video game, but the machine's actual application is not so trivial.

The equipment was a demonstration version of robotic surgery technology that Red Bluff's St. Elizabeth Community Hospital hopes to soon bring to their facilities. Currently, the hospital is upgrading its surgery department to support the high-tech equipment. This will require upgrades to their decontamination system to accommodate the machine's arms as well as other updates.

Mercy Foundation North Development Officer Delcie Strahan said the overall goal is to raise about \$1.25 million for the project to prepare for the robotic system. Last October, [Sierra Pacific Foundation donated \\$1 million](#) toward upgrades at St. Elizabeth, \$750,000 of which was designated toward the surgery center project.

Strahan said it has been exciting and rewarding to see the project take shape. Ultimately, having robotic surgery equipment is a way for the hospital to stay "cutting edge," not only in patient care but also in attracting doctors.

Physician recruitment can be so challenging, Strahan said, and many doctors are now being trained on robotic surgery equipment and look for jobs where it is available to use. Providing equipment at the Tehama County hospital is one way to encourage qualified medical professionals to live and work where they feel valued, Strahan explained, adding that it also demonstrates community investment.

On Thursday night, the goal was to show how the equipment works and how important it could be to community healthcare.

Mercy Foundation North President Jake Mangas recognized other donors to the project so far, including the Corning Healthcare District and North State Cancer League. Corning Healthcare District Manager Tina Hale said the campaign would bring important health-related services to Tehama County, and she called it a “worthy goal.”

The project is close to reaching its goal, Mangas said.

Hospital President and Dignity Health North State Market President Rodger Page said he is excited as he sees the project take closer steps to having the technology available in Tehama County.

“We want the best technology for our area,” Page said.

Having the technology will be beneficial for patients, as it may mean they don’t have to go out of town for certain services, Page said, while also benefiting the surgeons. The use of robotic technology enables precise manipulation, and extra arms can help hold objects in place.

Page echoed Strahan’s sentiment about recruiting and retaining surgeons, saying prospective doctors often ask whether the hospital has robotic technology. When competing against other areas with the equipment, Page said they often end up losing the candidate.

“When we get the dollars, we should have that technology here in about a year,” Page said.

Kristi Steadman, a campaign co-chair and board member with Mercy Foundation North, said that seeing the demonstration of the robotic technology put her mind at ease. When she first heard “robots,” Steadman said, “it kind of freaked me out,” but upon seeing it in use, she said her mind was changed.

The surgeon is operating the equipment the entire time, Steadman explained, and if the doctor even moves their head from the machine, everything stops in place.

Dr. James Gonzalez of the St. Elizabeth surgery team estimated he has completed about 500 to 1000 surgeries with the robotic equipment at other locations. The equipment salesman on-site was able to pull up Gonzalez's exact number of robotic surgeries and confirm he has completed 791.

Gonzalez offered an expert demonstration of how the equipment works, passing one rubber band hoop through another with ease. At one point in time, Gonzalez said he would never use a robot, but now he wishes he had one all the time, even outside of the operating room for other precise tasks, like fishing acorns out of pipes at his house, courtesy of a busy squirrel.

Gonzalez compared the motions to operate the machine to oars on a boat, explaining it requires stopping and pulling in controlled motions. When he pulls his head away, the machine stops in place. Pedals allow him to switch between the four available arms.

The surgeon's knowledge ultimately guides the work, Gonzalez explained. The robot provides greater visibility through light and magnification than other forms of surgery and can hold things in place without tiring, unlike a human assistant might. With the higher magnification and light, Gonzalez said he felt it helps avoid accidental cuts because everything can be seen so clearly.

The technology is used for minimally invasive procedures, so with small incisions and reduced manipulation, the doctor said healing times are often faster. He said it can be used in many, many different procedures that are expanding every day, and would hopefully allow people in Tehama County to receive services locally without having to travel.

Gonzalez sees significant potential in having the equipment at St. Elizabeth.

"The people in the north state deserve it," the doctor said.

For more information on the campaign or for ways to get involved, visit [SupportMercyNorth.org](https://www.supportmercynorth.org) or call or email Delcie Strahan at 530-529-8016 or [Delcie.Strahan@CommonSpirit.org](mailto:Delcie.Strahan@CommonSpirit.org).

**2026** >  
**May** >  
**23**