Delta Women's Clinic reopens; 3 doctors will do abortions

By STEVE WHEELER

Delta Women's Clinic, where pro-life and pro-choice activists battled verbally and physically for years, reopened Friday after a three-month search for a doctor to perform abortions.

Administrator Esther McGuire said the clinic began seeing patients again Friday morning. Delta Women's is the only abortion clinic in Louisiana that has a team of three doctors who will work on a rotating basis.

The new doctor, a change in policy, she said. Abortions won't be performed after the 13th week of pregnancy. Previously, abortions were performed up until the 22nd week, she said.

McGuire said the clinic, which closed Sept. 3 when a replacement doctor couldn't be found for the retiring Dr. Richard Glidden, reopened at the same 4928 Bennington Avenue site that made headlines in 1992.

The national anti-abortion group Operation Rescue staged a weeklong series of protests - the "Summer of Purpose" - in July of 1992. Pro-life leaders have promised Delta will see more protests.

Bill Shank, the director of Operation Rescue Louisiana, said he is "condemned and disappointed" that the clinic has reopened and said his group is gearing up for more protests.

"We're contacting pastors in the area and alerting them now," Shank said.

He said the protests will begin as soon as possible, probably next week.

McGuire said that, while the clinic reopened Friday, it probably will need a new home soon.

The clinic's leased building, located at 4928 Bennington Avenue, will go on the federal auction block Dec. 28, and depending on who buys the property, the clinic will move soon after, she said.

"We plan to be open continuously until we move in the next 60 days," McGuire said. All but one of the former staff has been rehired, she said.

She said the clinic has been searching since September for a new building. Clinic officials haven't decided whether the new building will be leased or purchased, she said.

"There are a couple of places we're in negotiations with," McGuire said. She declined to disclose the locations.

McGuire said volunteers kept the administrative office open to answer the phones at the clinic while it was closed.

"The sad truth is, our phones haven't stopped," she said. "The demand has remained constant throughout."

McGuire declined to identify the three doctors who will work at a team. She indicated they don't live in Baton Rouge.

"Our doctors commute," she said.

"The clinic's hours of operation will vary initially," McGuire said.

"We'll probably be doing procedures three days a week," she said. On the other day, the clinic will

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perform pregnancy testing, counseling and administrative duties.

The clinic administrator said she expects little will change with the protests.

"I anticipate the protesters will continue to exercise their freedom of speech," McGuire said.

A group called the St. Mary and St. Joseph Family Memorial Association bought the vacant lot next door to the clinic in July and plans to build a chapel and "American Holocaust Memorial" on the site.

John Casby, the attorney representing the group, said ground-breaking will be later this month.

Meanwhile, Shank said the clinic will again be the target of pro-life protesters.

Shank said his group knows of only one doctor who will work at the clinic. He said he believes the doctor, like the former doctor, will commute from Alabama.

"We're going to marshal our forces to chase him he's not welcome," Shank said. "We're going to have people out there. We believe this man will be discouraged and quit also.

"The pressure that God will put upon them. They will have to close," he said.

During the "Summer of Purpose," the city built a chain-link fence down the middle of Bennington Avenue to separate activists and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in overtime for police officers and other measures during the sweltering week.

Police aren't happy at the prospect of more protests.

If abortion opponents square off again, "It's going to cause us some problems," Police Chief Greg Pharr said Friday.

"We're just going to try to enforce the law fairly and without favor to either side," the chief said.