

# Will Columbia County Have a Hospital? No One Knows - Yet

By April Bamburg

The Oregon Health Authority denied the application for the 12-bed Columbia River Community Hospital on October 22. Six days later, the Columbia Health District Board of Directors authorized an attorney to initiate a request for an informal hearing to present further information about the project, in hopes of changing the minds of Dr. Grant Higginson and the Oregon Health Authority.

By mid-November, CHD hospital project spokeswoman Pam Powell said that the hearing had not yet been set.

The cost of this informal hearing? About \$75,000 for consultants, according to project manager Tary Carlson.

Grant Higginson, M.D., M.P.H., and reviewers of the Certificate of Need application expressed concern that the new hospital could draw enough physicians and providers to adequately staff the hospital, secure and maintain an adequate revenue stream to be viable, and that the limited hospital facilities would not decrease the number of ambulance transports to hospitals in Portland and Longview.

Another factor in the denial is a perceived need for greater primary care, according to Higginson.

"The public told us that primary care is the most important need of the community," he said. "While the health district was able to show the need for a limited number of new hospital beds, the increased cost to patients because of having to use an emergency department rather than an urgent care center might actually reduce access to care, particularly for low-income individuals," he said.

To address the issue of lacking primary care, the health district will include a primary care clinic in the first phase of operations at Columbia River Community Hospital.

"We'll start with fewer administrators in the administration wing and run it there," Powell said. "The health district board has always talked about having a rural health care clinic in the hospital," she said.

Aside from the lack of primary care physicians, other points cited in

the proposed denial are two-tier billing rates, ambulance transports and financial viability.

Concerns regarding the two-tier billing system, which offers differing rates for urgent care treatment and emergency treatment, will be addressed in further paperwork submitted by the district, Powell said.

In a previous CHD press release, project manager Carlson said that the charges for the hospital "were calculated with this methodology using Legacy rates, so urgent care cases would not be charged emergency room rates."

Yet another issue for the state is a claim that ambulance transports outside the area would be reduced, as patients would go to CRCH instead of a Portland or Longview hospital.

In his denial, Higginson wrote that advantages include convenience for local residents, access to a 24-hour emergency room without a 30-minute drive, and relief of burden and cost for local EMS services. At the same time, Higginson pointed out a disadvantage to the emergency services.

"One disadvantage is that it places a higher burden on the local emergency transport system to correctly triage low-intensity cases to the new facility," Higginson wrote.

Regarding ambulance trips, which the health district believes would decrease with the formation of the hospital, the board is working to provide specific data to elaborate on a report that showed between 30 and 50 percent of ambulance trips could stay at the local hospital. The report was prepared by Columbia River Fire and Rescue and the Scappoose Fire District.

Regarding the financial viability of the hospital, Higginson wrote about concerns that the health district had not shown that an adequate revenue stream would exist to fund the hospital.

"We feel updating the proforma to include changes that have occurred with interest rates, additional revenue projections and costs will help the overall financial picture of the hospital," Carlson said. According to the health district, the state reviewed the overall feasibility without the property tax income from a successful 2004 levy which established a tax rate of \$.38/\$1,000 in

estimated value.

In a meeting on October 28, citizens expressed concern about site preparations which were occurring at the time, and some supported the state's decision.

Larry Karnoski, who lives on Millard Road, said that he agreed with the state's decision and asked the board to "do what's in the best financial interest of the taxpayers."

"I wish you'd forget it and join forces with Legacy," said Warren resident Thelma Bonar, who is gathering signatures to repeal the hospital tax and issue a refund. She hopes to have the "People's Initiative for Justice" on the May 2010 ballot. Legacy Health Systems runs an urgent care center located in St. Helens, a center that will close if the Columbia River Community Hospital is built.

Last year, the health district secured land for the proposed hospital in a three-way land swap with the City of St. Helens and the St. Helens School District. Improvements began this summer at the site, 35311 Millard Road, but have since ceased.

"How were permits issued for something that hadn't been approved?" asked Scappoose resident Alta Lynch.

According to feasibility consultant Bob McGuirk, the Oregon Health Authority requires control of the land for the proposed hospital before they will consider a certificate of need.

CHD Board member Laura Tomanka explained that work at the site on Millard Road was not related to the hospital, but instead work on wetlands that "were not functioning properly."

Scappoose resident and Columbia County Commissioner Rita Bernhard has, as an individual, supported the hospital project, and

said that she is disappointed in the decision.

"The decision [of] what to do next has to come from [the health district board]," Bernhard said in October. "I think there's a lot more questions than answers right now."

Not everyone is disappointed in this outcome, or surprised.

In the past five years, Deer Island resident Tammy Maygra has attended county commission meetings and spoken out about issues surrounding the hospital project. She was just one individual who questioned the district's use of a tax of \$.38 per \$1,000 in assessed value, a tax that was levied in 2004 to provide funding for construction and operation of a hospital in South Columbia County. She has also questioned how many individuals would willingly go to the Columbia River Community Hospital in an emergency.

"I'm just really happy that the state has listened to the testimony presented at the hearings and listened to the people," Maygra said on October 23.

The requested hearing on the denial has not officially been announced. Look for more information in a future issue of *Vernonia's Voice*.

*This article has been published at April's web site, <http://www.examiner.com/x-19696-Columbia-County-Buzz-Examiner>.*

# Weedman Has Plans for Columbia County's Solid Waste Program

By April Bamburg

On September 29, Roy Weedman took on the position of Columbia County Solid Waste Coordinator, and he's already jumped right into the job, setting several priorities, including expansion of the recycling program, increasing public outreach and increasing the amount of materials recycled in the county.

Weedman expects to perform waste sorts at the transfer station, as one of his goals is to get a larger return on recyclables. Other priorities include increased public outreach to community groups and businesses.

An immediate task he has taken on is updating the Columbia County Recycling website. Instead of forcing citizens to search for the page, Weedman would like to see that it is more user-friendly.

"I want people to see the information as soon as they open the page," he said.

As the program coordinator, Weedman will manage the county's solid waste franchises, work to ensure compliance with solid waste regulations and oversee the Columbia County Transfer Station. In addition, he will be involved with the

county's emergency operations center in times of emergency. In that capacity, Weedman will be responsible for "disaster debris management."

He will also take over a portion of the Dump Stoppers program from Code Enforcement Officer Robert Crain, who will still handle enforcement issues, but Weedman will be responsible for tracking and expansion of the program.

Additionally, one of the areas that Weedman will focus on is public outreach. "I love teaching people," he said, "especially those who want to do the right thing."

These tasks aren't new for Weedman, who earned a degree in Environmental Studies with a minor in Geology from Portland State University in 1999, following a retirement from United Parcel Service.

He worked for small

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