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Mental health treatment facility discussed for Heppner

By David Sykes

The developer of residential treatment facilities, which are used to house and treat mentally ill persons convicted of crimes, met with community members Tuesday to discuss the possibility of locating a treatment facility here in Heppner.

Rod Estes, a Regional Residential Development Specialist with Lifeways, the company which would run the Secure Residential Treatment Facility (SRTF), spoke with members of the Willow Creek Valley Economic Development Group, the Heppner City Council and the County Court about the possibility of locating an eight-bed facility to house people who have committed crimes and found "guilty except for insanity."

McNary place in Umatilla opened in December and is similar in construction to a treatment facility being discussed for the Heppner area.

The facility would be different from the one recently proposed for Fossil, which caused a great deal of community upheaval and animosity and was eventually abandoned, in that the proposed Heppner facility would not house sexual offenders. It "could" house any type of criminal, Estes said, but the type allowed here would be determined by the administrator of the facility, which would most likely be the Morrow/Wheeler Behavioral Health, he said.

Rod Estes

The facility would give an economic boost to the area, Estes explained, providing 20 to 24 full time positions paying $30,000 to $65,000 in wages for annual salaries of $720,000. The annual operating budget would be around $960,000, and construction costs of the facility would be $1.2 million, he said.

In addition most supplies for the facility would be purchased locally, including food, medications, and transportation and general supplies. It would also strengthen the local mental health services, increase local school populations with more students of workers, and generally strengthen the local economy, he pointed out.

Along with Estes at the meeting was Tim Mahoney, Operations Manager of McNary Place, a similar, but not exact type of facility recently opened in Umatilla.

Residents of the proposed Heppner SRTF would be housed behind a six-foot PVC fence, behind which is an eight-foot fence equipped with motion detectors. There would also be security cameras and alarms as part of the overall security system. Some residents would at times be allowed out in the community to go to the store and to other activities, Estes said, but only under the supervision of one staff member for each two residents. The design of the building is to "blend" the facility into the area in which it is located and to avoid an institutional look, he said. It is also mandatory that the facility be located close to a hospital and police facilities.

Mahoney said there have been no escapes or serious problems at the Umatilla facility since its opening in December, 2007, and said the major mental health problems the residents face are bipolar and schizophrenia, both controlled with medications. He said residents of the facility are motivated to behave since many have been allowed to come from a more institutional type facility such as the state hospital to the rural and small town residential facilities. He said many have been allowed out to go to the store and are even planning a trip to a baseball game in the Tri-Cities. The residents have jobs and are paid a salary of $150 per month.

All the persons that are recommended for placement in an SRTF "have been highly screened and reviewed the State Psychiatric Security Review Board (PSRB), Estes said. The PSRB is extremely sensitive and cautious concerning the safety of communities, he added.

Some of the concerns addressed by Estes include:

The resident's family and friends move to the area. Estes said most of the people do not have active or supportive family or friends, however, Mahoney disagreed and said residents at his facility do receive a fair amount of visitors.

Once out of the facility residents will live here. Both Estes and Mahoney agreed that most of the residents come from the west side of the state and will return there once released.

The residents will threaten our area and make it unsafe to live here. Estes said studies have shown that the resident facilities have not caused any increase in crime.

As an additional benefit Estes said that as part of the project a two-bed crisis respite unit will be added to the facility. This unit will be open to local people experiencing a mental health crisis and give them a place to stabilize and avoid hospitalization.

Tim Mahoney

Mahoney and Estes met with the community members for about two hours Tuesday evening, answering questions and discussing the project, and there was a consensus of the group that the public should become informed before any planning for the facility moves forward.

The Heppner City Council plans to take up the proposal for discussion at its next council meeting Monday, July 14 at 7p.m. at city hall. There was also talk of holding public meetings on the proposal; however nothing definite has been announced.

If the facility were built it would most likely be administered by Morrow/Wheeler Behavioral Health, of which Kimberly Lindsay of Lexington is the director. Some of the services Morrow/Wheeler Behavioral Health provides are mental health assessment, alcohol/drug assessment, DUII evaluations, individual, group and family therapy.

Inside picture of McNary Place

Public health advisory issued for Willow Creek Reservoir

A health advisory prompted by high algae levels found in Willow Creek Reservoir, near Heppner was issued today by the Oregon Department of Human Services and the Morrow County Health Department.

Water sampling has confirmed the presence of blue-green algae in concentrations which can produce toxins harmful to humans and animals. These levels can be associated with dangerous toxin concentrations in the water, according to World Health Organization guidelines. Swallowing or inhaling water droplets should be avoided, as well as skin contact with water by humans or animals. The toxins cannot be removed by boiling, filtering or treating water.

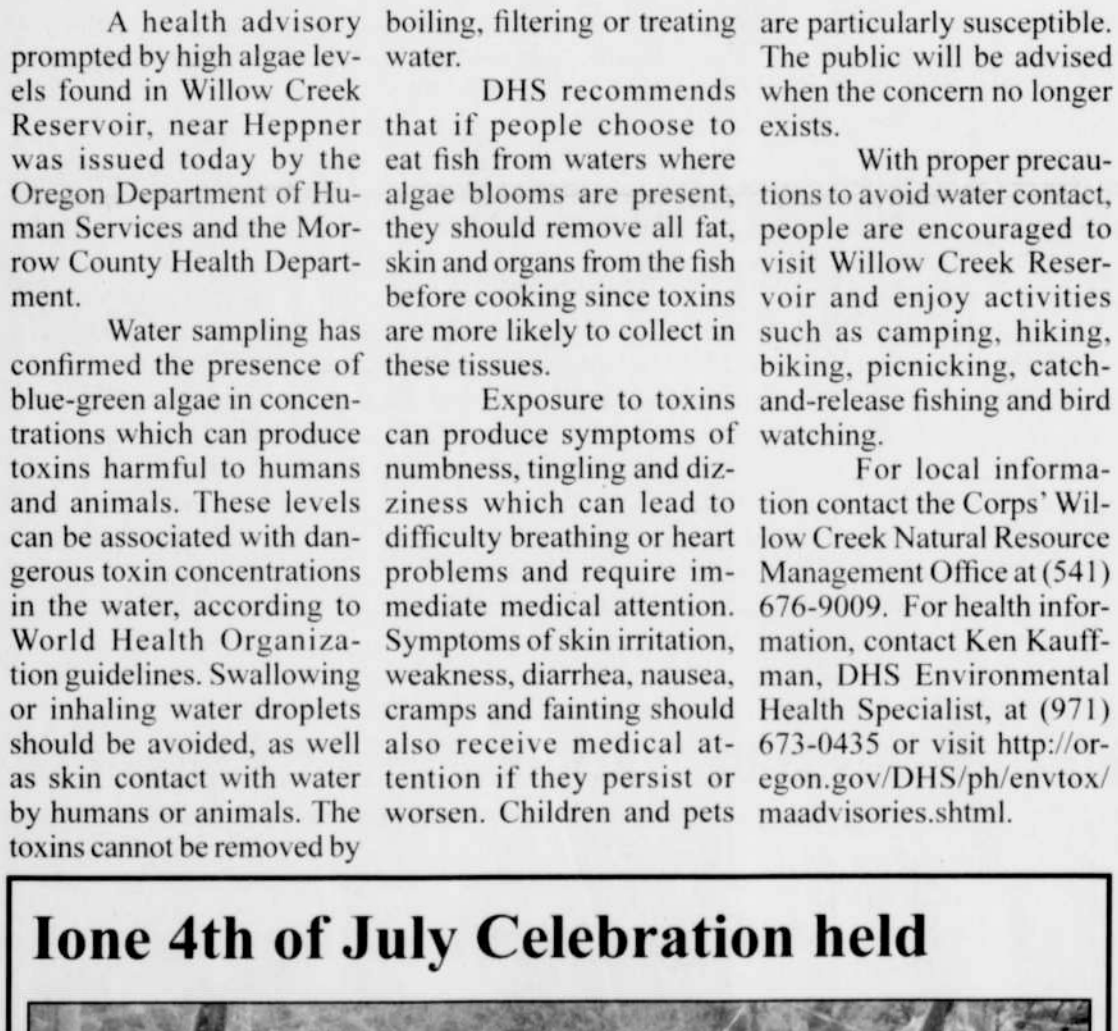
DHS recommends that if people choose to eat fish from waters where algae blooms are present, they should remove all fat, skin and organs from the fish before cooking since toxins are more likely to collect in these tissues.

Exposure to toxins can produce symptoms of numbness, tingling and dizziness which can lead to difficulty breathing or heart problems and require immediate medical attention. Symptoms of skin irritation, weakness, diarrhea, nausea, cramps and fainting should also receive medical attention if they persist or worsen. Children and pets are particularly susceptible. The public will be advised when the concern no longer exists.

With proper precautions to avoid water contact, people are encouraged to visit Willow Creek Reservoir and enjoy activities such as camping, hiking, biking, picnicking, catch-and-release fishing and bird watching.

For local information contact the Corps' Willow Creek Natural Resource Management Office at (541) 676-9009. For health information, contact Ken Kauffman, DHS Environmental Health Specialist, at (971) 673-0435 or visit http://oregon.gov/DHS/ph/envtox/maadvisories.shtml.

Ione 4th of July Celebration held



The City of Ione held their annual 4th of July Celebration this past weekend. More pictures of different events can be found on page Four. *-Photo by David Sykes*

ALL NEWS AND ADVERTISEMENT DEADLINE:
MONDAYS AT 5:00 P.M.

Articles wanted for annual fair edition

The annual Morrow County Fair is fast approaching. Once again this year the Heppner Gazette-Times will be putting together a special fair edition. Anyone interested in writing any fair related articles are asked to turn in those articles by Friday, July 25. Articles can be dropped of at the Heppner Gazette-Times or emailed to editor@rapidserve.net.

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