

Hospital board votes to close obstetrics unit

Insurance, Medicaid problems too much

by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

KILMARNOCK—Rappahannock General Hospital has announced that it will stop offering obstetrics services February 29, forcing expectant mothers in the area, and anxious dads, to drive an hour or more to deliver their babies.

"It's like taking a step backwards for women to have to go to Richmond or elsewhere to have their babies," said Alice Blackstone, who has served for two years on the hospital board.

"Many women choose to have their babies here, some choose to go elsewhere, but many women don't have a choice. They just don't have the means to go anywhere else," she said.

Blackstone described last week's vote on a resolution to close the obstetrics unit as emotional.

"If there was any way the hospital could make a different decision, we'd definitely keep this facility open," she said.

Ten of the board's 14 members were present at the January 28

meeting and voted unanimously to pass the resolution, according to James M. Holmes, the hospital's president and chief executive officer.

Holmes said the board had to take action at some point, after learning in October that Drs. James Hamilton and Matthew Vogel of Rappahannock OB/GYN Inc. would likely lose their malpractice insurance.

The two doctors are the only private obstetricians practicing in the Northern Neck and have privileges at the hospital, where some 4,000 babies have been delivered in 27 years.

Rappahannock OB/GYN, which has served the RGH maternity unit since 1977, received notice last fall that its insurance through Commonwealth Medical of Washington, D.C., would not be renewed on November 30, 2003.

Drs. Hamilton and Vogel scrambled for an alternative and were granted a three-month extension for \$25,000. That extension expires February 29,



Rappahannock OB/GYN nurses and staff visited Del. Albert C. Pollard Jr. and other legislators last week, exploring options to keep delivery services at Rappahannock General Hospital in Kilmarnock.

when the hospital will no longer have obstetricians to service the OB unit.

Rappahannock OB/GYN and its doctors were named in four malpractice suits within 12

months, according to Dr. Hamilton. The suits stemmed from incidents which occurred some four to six years ago.

According to Dr. Hamilton, while most lawsuits must be filed

within two years of the date of discovery, lawsuits against obstetricians may span a 20-year period, from the time the child reaches the age of 18 plus two years. For that reason, obstetri-

cians have to carry a "tail policy" which covers previous acts.

The cost for the policy which covers past acts is \$150,000, which Drs. Vogel and Hamilton will still have to carry even after their malpractice insurance expires.

When Dr. Hamilton came to RGH 21 years ago out of residency, malpractice insurance at Rappahannock OB/GYN was approximately \$6,000, according to Holmes.

Dr. Hamilton said the insurance for the practice had soared to \$70,000 last year and estimates for this year had the rates nearly doubling.

"We're not alone in this issue, we're just at the front of it," said Dr. Hamilton. "This is year one of the crisis and this is not going to go away for us."

The increases in insurance costs have been compounded by the fact that Medicaid reimbursements are falling, according to Holmes.

Some 270 babies were delivered at RGH in 2003 and 65 percent (or 175) of those involved mothers on Medicaid. Another three to four percent were "no pay" and the expenses for those deliveries were taken as a loss, said Holmes.

"This is really a two-pronged (continued on page A15)



Virginia Department of Health engineer Charles W. Swanson (above) last week conducted a question and answer session in Lancaster regarding the agricultural application of sludge.

Meeting features sludge spiel

by Robb Hoff

LANCASTER—A group of concerned citizens, farmers, business interests, and state health department officials engaged in a two-hour public meeting last week about the application of treated sewage waste on farms in Lancaster County.

Conducted by Charles W. Swanson, a Virginia Department of Health treatment technology engineer in the division of wastewater engineering, the meeting featured information from Swanson and a question and answer session.

He explained that the sewage sludge used for farming applications is refined human waste in the form of biosolids.

"It's specific sludge that's been treated well enough to become a biosolid," Swanson said. "It's not raw human waste, but it does have the appearance of raw human waste."

Biosolid application is currently performed in nearly 50 Virginia counties covering about 400,000 acres, he added.

Biosolid supplies

Swanson provided details about the type of biosolids that appear destined for some Lancaster County farms by the Remington-based biosolids supplier Recyc Systems Inc.

He said the Class B biosolids that state and federal court decisions have mandated that Virginia counties must allow for farming

applications can have fecal coliform counts up to 2,000 times higher than exceptional quality Class A biosolids that are sold commercially in pellet or dry form as fertilizer for residential use.

However, Swanson noted, the Class B biosolids from a predominant Recyc Systems Inc. source, the Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant in Washington, D.C., often yield significantly lower fecal coliform counts than the Class A biosolid allowance of up to 1,000 milligrams per kilogram of dry material.

Recyc Systems vice-president Susan Trumbo said the Blue (continued on page A14)

Farming benefits vs. health risks debated during biosolids session

by Robb Hoff

LANCASTER—The benefits of biosolids application for farming, especially during dry and hot weather, were described last week by Virginia Department of Health engineer Charles W. Swanson as organic matter for free.

"You'll have a heck of a lot better soil," said Swanson. "You'll have more bushels, you'll have more corn."

Swanson said a truckload containing five to six dry tons of biosolids would add an estimated one-quarter inch per acre to the soil, bolstering the percentage of organic matter and retaining more water to help crops grow.

"It's not a five-gallon bucket type problem," Swanson said of the soil replenishing. "You've got to get big."

Permitted for one year in a three year period, the biosolid application is free but Swanson said there are other costs to the farmer, including high phosphorous content that has to be managed, exclusion from organic grower certification, and a delayed fertilizer effect.

"It's not like an inorganic fertilizer that's ready to go as soon as you lay it down," said Swanson.

The material must first decay for a couple months, he said.

The farming value of biosolids aside, most of the people in attendance at last week's meeting were there for specifics about the potential health risks and environmental effects of using treated human waste for crop production.

Swanson offered assurances that such potential health risks as the accumulation of heavy metal toxins, attraction of disease-carrying insects and water

Sludge permits are pending

Permits are pending in Lancaster County for the soil application of biosolids on the following tracts:

- 184.5 acres in five fields owned by Tommy L. Towles along Route 622 and Peirces Road near Nuttsville. The adjoining property owners listed in the application are: Roberta A. Pope, Jane L. Savin, the Land Corporation, Cecil C. Swann and Theodore Fallin.

- 145.5 acres in seven fields owned by L. Meade Conley along Routes 600 and 617 near Lebanon Baptist Church. The adjoining property owners are Centerview Farm Inc., Bill E. and Nancy M. Darby, Ronald D. and Jane A. Forrester, Leon Doubline, Betty L. Kelly, Joyce B. Headley Life Estate, Potomac Supply Company, John H. Harding Jr. and Karen M. Harding.

- 141.3 acres in five fields near Litwalton and Balls Branch of Lancaster Creek and also property off Shore Drive owned by John A. Chilton. The adjoining property owners are Robert W. and Doris E. Gill, Spencer F. Ball, E.M. Fisher Estate, Edwin Barrack Estate, John N. McCarty and Larry E. Brewer.

- 72.5 acres owned by C.C. Swann adjacent to the Towles property. The adjoining property owners are Rita E. Boyd, William C. Doggett Sr., Willie A. and T.E. Bush Estate, Michael A. Lee, Richard Jordan Estate, Geraldine Owens Estate, Freddie O. Owens, Thomas L. Towles, and Chesapeake Forest Products.

well contamination are negligible. He said biosolids not meeting health department standards must digest further or be lime stabilized, or else they must be dumped in a landfill.

"We have carte blanche power to say if your sludge isn't good enough, you can't land apply," Swanson said.

However, former Lancaster County supervisor Donald O. Conaway questioned whether the assurances served to promote a biosolids company or actually represented the interests of citizens.

"It seems like we're still not getting the clear answers because we still have the fear of the unknown," said Conaway.

He likened the long-term potential health hazard situation to that of the herbicide Agent

Orange used during the Vietnam War and also cited other potential health hazards, like the overturning of a truck hauling biosolids in Westmoreland County last month.

"If those signs of fear are there, then you can understand why there are a lot of fears here in the county," Conaway said.

Rev. Gayl Fowler of the Salvation Army/Interfaith Council water committee encouraged the health department to consider increasing buffer distances for biosolid applications near older and ungrouted shallow wells.

"Those wells are a bit more susceptible than say an artesian well that somebody has," Rev. Fowler said.

Rev. Fowler thanked health department officials for visiting (continued on page A14)

Spike in reassessment may not equate to higher taxes

by Robb Hoff

LANCASTER—Many Lancaster County property owners this week are receiving eye-opening notices listing the latest assessed value of their real estate.

On average, the values have risen. County administrator William H. Pennell estimated that overall county property values are 35 percent higher than when the last reassessment was performed in 2000.

"That's based on actual sales and market studies that were done," Pennell said.

He attributed much of the increased assessment to the value of waterfront property, which has soared over the past three years.

However, the increased property value does not necessarily equate to higher taxes for all property owners, he explained.

The tax rate, set annually by the board of supervisors during its budget adoption process, determines how much a landowner must pay in real estate taxes. The current rate is \$.60 per \$100 of the value.

Based on the new assessment, Pennell estimates that a tax rate ranging from \$.43 to

\$.47 per \$100 would provide nearly the same revenues (\$6.8 million) as anticipated in the current 2003-04 county budget.

The supervisors hold a public hearing on the budget and tax rate in June, once needed expenditures and other anticipated revenues for the upcoming fiscal year are determined.

Meanwhile, property owners who question the values placed on their properties can discuss their concerns with representatives of Blue Ridge Mass Appraisal, the company that performed the reassessment. To set an appointment for an informal hearing with the assessors, call 462-6040.

Pennell noted that some calls are already being fielded.

"They will continue to hold these informal hearings until there are no more calls," Pennell said.

After the informal hearing process with the assessors is complete, property owners can further contest their reassessment through the county board of equalization, which is a five-member citizen board appointed by the supervisors.

Democratic primary is Tuesday

by Reid Pierce Armstrong

Virginians head to the polls next Tuesday, February 10, to choose their favorite Democratic candidate for the 2004 presidential election.

Candidates vying for the Democratic nomination include retired Gen. Wesley Clark of Arkansas, Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina and Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, who will bring their campaigns to Virginia in the days before the election.

Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, the current front-runner for the nomination, Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio, the Rev. Al Sharpton of New York are also on the ballot.

Rep. Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri and Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman of Connecticut remain on the ballot, however, they have formally withdrawn from the race.

Tuesday's election is technically a presidential preference primary that precedes district and state Democratic Party conven-

tions. Virginia's 96 delegates and 13 alternates to be selected during those conventions will be proportionally allocated to presidential candidates based on the results of the primary.

District-level delegates and alternates will be selected in district conventions in May and other delegates and alternates will be elected during the state con-

vention on June 5. They all will report to the Democratic National Convention in Boston in July to officially select the party's nominees for president and vice-president.

All registered voters in Virginia are eligible to cast a ballot in the primary. Polling places open at 6 a.m. and close at 7 p.m. Voting (continued on page A15)

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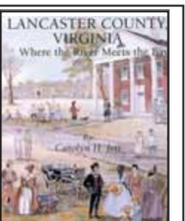
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