

Next steps for critical access hospital: Cass County Board to receive update by Jan. 1

Published: Wednesday, October 22, 2008 4:36 PM CDT
The Pilot-Independent
<http://www.walkermn.com>

While the old buildings at Ah-Gwah-Ching are being torn down, work continues on the vision of building a critical access hospital and clinic that will serve residents of north-central Cass County.

"The work of the Critical Access Hospital (CAH) Task Force regarding regulatory and legislative waivers is nearly complete," said Task Force Chair John Warren. Essentia Community Hospitals and Clinics (EHC), formerly part of the Benedictine Health System, the project's lead provider, has completed all of the elements of the lead provider agreement and is working on the next steps in the process.

EHC has committed to developing an updated plan for the project by the end of 2008. The plan will outline an organizational structure, potential capital partners and organizational and investment capital needed to finance the current estimate of \$35 million for the new hospital and clinic. Presently EHC is in discussions with potential partners in the project, such as Innovis Health of Fargo and Brainerd Lakes Health, an EHC affiliate, regarding formation of a medical staff and organizational structure. EHC is also identifying other potential partners that may benefit the project and share in its development.

After the updated plan is presented, EHC will be working with the CAH Task Force on the next steps.

"We are developing a detailed plan and agreements that will keep the vision moving forward for Cass County. Our goal is to present the plan to the Cass County Board and all stakeholders by the end of the year," said Michael Hedrix, EHC senior vice president.

EHC is committed to investing in and sustaining local rural health care, as evidenced by the recent successful partnership of Hackensack with Brainerd Medical Center, an EHC affiliate.

"The new clinic in Hackensack does not preclude the need for a critical access hospital and clinic at Ah-Gwah-Ching," Hedrix explained. "We have an interest in the whole region; it is part of an overall EHC vision to provide health services to residents of this area."

Hedrix added that the vision for the future of this health care project extends beyond the critical access hospital. The operation could include dental services and the ambulance districts at Walker and Longville. The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe also has been approached to look at reservation health services as an important part of any future plans.

"Right now our focus is on securing additional partners who wish to invest in this great opportunity to meet the health care needs of a growing region," Hedrix concluded.